

III

美浜ヨシヒコ

ILLUST—fame

炎まみれの
騎士

Author: Yoshihiko Mihama
ILLUST: fame

ILLUST — fame

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煤まみれの騎士Ⅲ

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ILLUST — fame





「……………もういい。もういいです」

フェリシアを中心に魔力の奔流が渦を巻く。感情の昂りに呼応し、その強烈な魔力が現出しているのだ。

空気がずしりと重くなる。

圧倒的な力を持つ魔法の申し子に、世界が頭を垂れているかのようだ。

「立ち向かうと言いましたね。現実と言いましたね。でも、これこそが現実。何にも立ち向かえないのが、貴方の現実なんです。兄さま」

フェリシアの周囲に魔力光が迸る。

その美しさに一瞬目を奪われそうになりながら、彼は剣を構えた。

避け得なかった戦いが始まる。

覚悟を示すべき時が来たのだ。

「その愚かさを思い知らせてあげます!! 後悔なさい!!」

第五騎士団、魔導部隊総隊長、フェリシア、バックマン。

この戦場にあつて、倒すべき敵だ。

— STORY —

知勇ともに優れた神童・ロルフは、十五歳の時に誰もが神から授かるはずの魔力を授からなかった。

彼の生まれた人生は一転、男爵家を廃嫡、さらには幼馴染のエミリーとの婚約までも破棄され、騎士団では“煤まみれ”と罵られる地獄の日々を送ることになる。

しかし、ロルフは磨き上げた剣技。膨大な知識による機転。そして、折れることのない不屈の精神で、絶望的な戦況を変えてきた。

それでも、ロルフへの冷遇は変わることはなく……。ロルフはとうとう、あらぬ冤罪で第五騎士団を追放されてしまう。

魔族領に隣接する辺境へと派遣されたロルフ。そこで彼は、自分と同じ“煤まみれ”と蔑まれる魔族の奴隷少女・ミアと出会う。

ミアと過ごす毎日で、ロルフの中にあった疑問は、やがて強い決意へと変わっていく。

本当に魔族とは、滅ぼすべき邪悪なのだろうか。この罪なき子供は、なぜ悲しみを強いられているのか。

王国の騎士たちによる非情な魔族の蹂躞。終わることのない侵略と抗争。

その戦火の中で、ロルフは魔力を断裁する漆黒の剣、“煤の剣”を手にした。

神に棄てられた“煤まみれ”は、この理不尽な運命に抗うべく、魔族とともに――。

「ロンドシウス王国を倒す」

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煤まみれの 騎士

III

美浜ヨシヒコ
ILLUSTRATION — fame



シーラ・ラルセン

乗船部隊隊員。
回復術士。物静かだが、
ロルフには皆と同じく差別的。

イェルド・クランツ

乗船部隊隊員。
実力者だがロルフへの差別意識は
とりわけ強い。

フェリシア・バックマン

ロルフの妹。控えめで心優しい少女。
だが、最も低い地位にあるロルフの
妾を見るにつれ、
辛辣な物言いもするようになる。

**ラケル・
ニーホルム**

乗船部隊隊員。
大らかな性格だがロルフには
皆と同じく差別的。

**エステル・
ティセリウス**

第一騎士団団長。
国の英雄。強く厳格な本道を行く騎士。
個の武勇にも軍略にも優れる。



エミリー・メルネス

ロルフを愛する婚約者であり、
天真爛漫な少女。
しかし、婚約破棄や、ロルフの上官としての
立場のなかで心に影が差し始める。

ロルフ・バックマン

剣と知識に優れる青年。
だが魔力を授かることができず、
“運まみれ”として迫害される。
冷静で筋が通っており、極めて強い精神力を持つ。

— CHARACTER —

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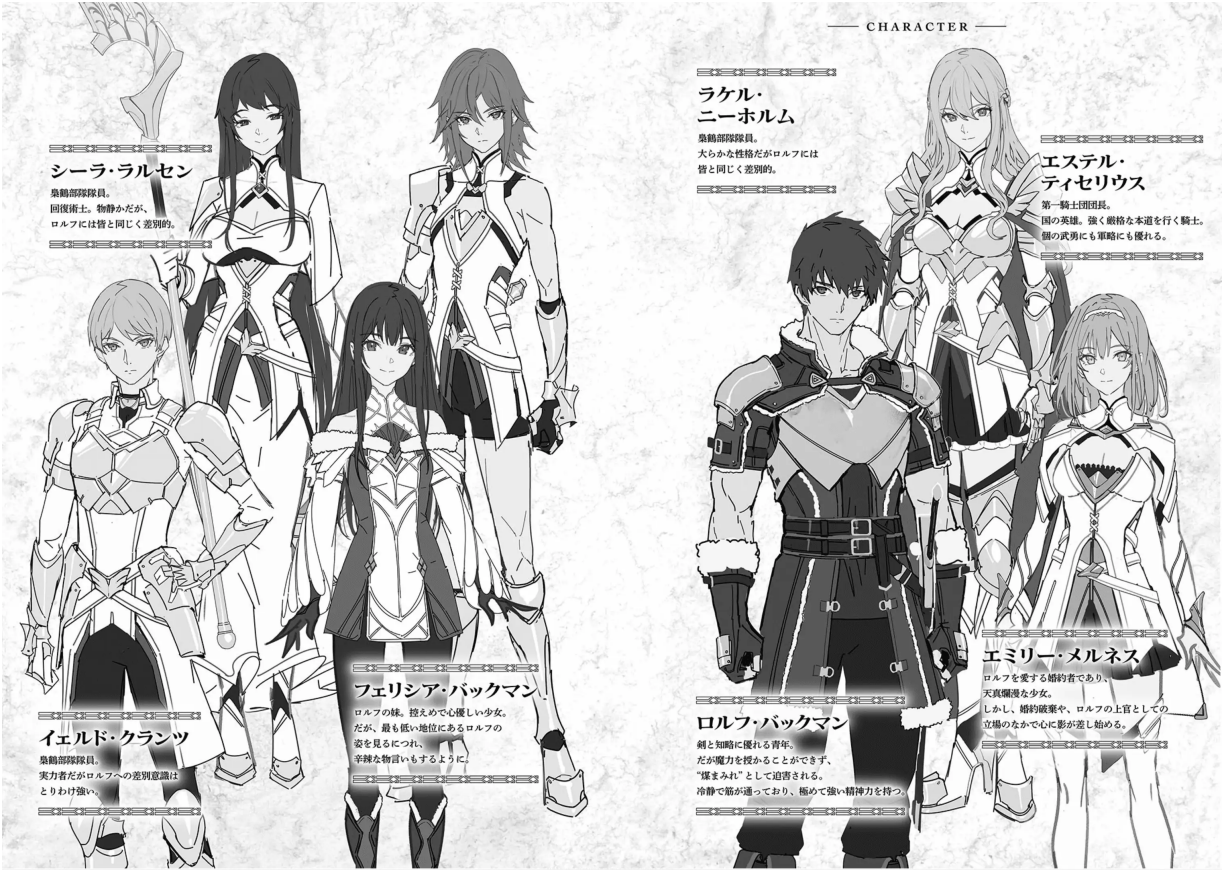
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Balasthea Stronghold.

Fort and fastness of Ström—though fast no more, and only faintly a fort, for now was its soldiery boiling in bedlam, whilst its commandant's seat stood dark and unsat. North of the gates loomed a stretch of Nafílim country, hemmed in by forests, near the mouth of which newly scintillated with a sea of candles.

That is, torches beyond count.

Night was fallen, and those far-off firelights seemed to seethe all the more hotly. Only some-odd hours before had a few Fiefguardsmen emerged from those very same forests, sallow and dispirited in their flight. Their words for the fort-men: Hensen was a failure. Absent the appalling report, any man would have taken the torches to be the Fiefguard's own, but oh, *alas*.

Why, dominion over this very domain hinged on Hensen's sacking. Such was the mind of each and every military man here. What fright they knew, then, upon learning of both the Fiefguard's loss and the spears of reprisal now bared balefully at Balasthea's battlements.

None could have predicted such a contingency. A madness made more mad by the unmaking of the fort's chain of command: neither commandant nor vice-commandant were anywhere to be seen at present.

All the while, the lurking Nafílim horde seemed a more enormous enemy, and in fact, it very much was: never before had so great a hostile number rallied before the margins of Ström. A number perhaps mustered in the wake of the fighting at the fólkheimr: felling the Fiefguard looked only to have whetted the devils' bloodlust, and now were they come to the margravate to slake it in full.

Who, then, would challenge so tremendous a foe? The fort-men certainly fancied themselves too fraught for the feat, commanderless as they were. The larger half of them fumed and flailed in confusion. The smaller all but sank in place, panicked.

But one amongst them was different.

Morten full-moiled with fury. His fingers fidgeted, all too fain to lay the blame. Much of it was reserved for the Vice-Commandant Ebbe, who, though left in charge of the fort, had frolicked off to Hensen with the now-fallen Fiefguard and his band of silvered soldiers. But the one who most annoyed this nail-biting bloke was none other than Rolf himself, for surely enough, the moment found the acting commandant off on some merry holiday.

Well, any situation less mad than this was a merry one, no doubt. Nevertheless, that gear-grating ungraced had ostensibly sped off to the forested foe-lands for some reconnaissance. Yet his return was unreported. Mayhap he was maimed? Unmade upon meeting some Nafílim force? A soothing salve upon Morten's nerves, if so.

"That guffin' good-fer-naught... Damn 'im...!" was his lip-biting outburst. Though true enough, Morten made himself a civil, simpering man whensoever aface his commandant, for truer still was the fort made a fairer place

thanks to Rolf's rigours. So long as that fangless leader did the leading, Morten and his fort-mates were most content to couch under the commandant's secure shade.

And yet Rolf was, at the end of the day, a defect, a Deiva-spurned sprout in which no growth ought be expected, for all odyl was denied from him. Thus Morten's mind deigned not to harbour a hint of reverence for Rolf. Empty praises were all the commandant would earn from him, and that was exactly what the soldier offered.

Morten well-fancied himself a savant of diplomacy as a result, thinking Rolf ill-discerning the dagger hidden behind his back. For Rolf was an ungraced; how *could* his hollow pate prewise Morten's deep designs?

Indeed, concealed scorn and derision were all he had for his commandant. How pale with appalment Morten was, then, when he spotted Rolf returning at last—

—riding amidst a Nafílim envoy.

::

"Hmph," scoffed Volker. "That Balasthea should break ere a bead of blood be spilt..."

Writ on his face was faint shock, an expression shared by Lise as the two walked through the corridor alongside me. Quiet, dark, and empty was the keep interior; the fort defenders had chosen surrender without resistance.

A rather wise decision on their part. The men were leaderless, after all, and faced with a foe of affrighting numbers. But to drive the nail in the coffin, counted amongst those enemy ranks was myself. The months of employ in this stronghold have imprinted in me every nook and cranny of the place, as well as every dot and detail of its operation and capabilities. Victory against so knowledgeable a foe, then, was all but a fever dream to these fort fellows.

They had at first quaked with confusion when I confronted them, and then with veiny fury. It lasted but a little while, however, for it soon set in for them that resistance would sooner wreak their bloody reckoning. I then compelled their quick decision on guarantee of their safe flight to Arbel, and realising their lives were otherwise on the verge of vain sacrifice, the soldiers at once saw the appeal of capitulation.

And so was precipitated the fall of Balasthea, without so much as a single swing of a sword to sting the scene.

But here on hid the main hurdle.

In spite of the broken chain of command, word was likely making swiftly to the fief-burgh. Indeed, the margrave would be apprised apace were his precious fort to ever fall. And now that it did, we must do our part and prepare to oppose his war-like answer with all alacrity.

For that reason, I had set aside a moment to meet with a certain man.

“Time for a talk,” I said as the three of us stopped along the corridor, afront the appointed room. “Wait here a while.”

“Fair wi—ah, fair words find you, Rolf!” cheered Lise in a spirited whisper. Expectation, or perhaps even enjoyment, jubilated in her voice as I turned the doorknob. Entering, I found the room cast in grainy gloom, illumed only by a lonely lamp. Next to it was one of Balasthea’s bulwark-men: Morten.

“Rather long since last we met,” I greeted him, closing the door behind me. “Nay; ‘long’ be too long, thinking on it.”

Morten: the very man who ushered me out of Balasthea as I departed with Mia to her village. Though but a scant three days and a half had passed since then, it felt to me an age ago.

“C-Commandant, sir...” he said, sat at a small table, his hands in view as they vexedly fidgeted, “...wot be th’meanin’ o’ all this?”

And his voice was just as vexed, quivering confusedly. My actions seemed to him an impenetrable puzzle.

“Can’t believe your eyes?” I began. “I’ve *turned* on the kingdom, Morten.”

“T... *turn...!*” he wheezed. “Ye lost yer marbles, man...!?”

“Nay, I’m afraid not.”

Amidst the mirk of the room, I leant back upon the door and folded my arms, staring intently upon the appalled man. Glinting against the lamplight was sweat beading on both his brows.

“In Hensen, were it? When th’Fief-men fell,” he said unsteadily, pointing a finger at me. “Ye ‘ad a gander o’ their

bodies, bloodied an' all—that's when yer 'eart flip'd, when ye abandon'd th'banner, is it?"

I shook my head. "Wrong, Morten. All wrong. In fact, the Fiefguard hasn't fallen."

"W... *wot...*?" The face of a fool was then upon him... and perhaps upon me, as well, for I had little confidence in faking a look. Much gratitude, then, to the eigengrau veiling the air between us.

"The men've smote the fólkheimr's defences, my friend," continued my lie. "The Fiefguard holds Hensen as we speak."

"B-bu... but that sorts opposite wit' wot th'return'd Fiefmen said!" Morten began disputing. "Wot 'bout that 'orde wot's loomin' at th'wood-edge, ey? Wot explains 'em?"

"Those 'returned" Fiefguardsmen be turncoats themselves, Morten. The Nafílim paid them with fattened purses on promise of spewing lies to their fellow liegemen," I explained. "That horde you see is but half a host, lighting twice-fold torches to pretend a meaner number. A ruse, Morten. A *Nafílim* ruse. And a common one, at that, well-recounted in our war chronicles. Don't tell me you've little taste for literature, my good fellow?"

The soldier then flapped his lips like a fish out of water. It seemed his wits were too whelmed by my wiley words. And so I went on.

"The Fiefguard fought with perfection. Their numbers, their tactics all proved the tailwind to take Hensen. But to have *fallen*, instead? Balderdash, Morten. This, you know as well as I. Don't you?"

“I-I does, sir. I *should*,” Morten relented, wrinkling his brows. “...But wot then, Commandant? Wot’s this ‘bout turnin’ on th’kingdom, ey?”

“Not to worry,” I assured him, before resuming in a sharp whisper. “I’m only knifing along with the Nafílim for a while. They be desperate to spite the Fiefguard for their defeat at home, you see. Thus they give me aid, and I their prize.”

“Prize, sir?”

“Indeed—this *very fort*.”

————— ∴ —————

Unfolding my arms, I started forth, the wooden floor squeaking under my slow steps. Then, reaching Morten, I sat down across from him and stared deep into his eyes.

“Morten. Of all my men have you—and you *alone*—regarded me with any respect. Me: an ungraced. Yoná Herself ought shudder with shame, knowing you take for an equal whom She curses a coistril.”

“Uh er, th-that...” muttered Morten, uneasy.

“Yours... be a heart of *gold*, Morten. A far cry from the coals blackening the other blokes’ bosoms,” I continued with constructed pain, as though to squeeze blood out of a stone. “You *know*, don’t you? Of how I’ve long suffered their snideness, their *scorn*.”

I felt then my farce having gone a mite too far, a too-passionate thespian catching himself in his craze. But from the look of him, Morten seemed quite convinced of the act.

“Well... I’ve had my fill of their *filth*,” the play persisted. “Keen am I to leave Londosius. But not before lining my coffers full of coin.”

“C-coin?” Morten cocked his head. “Wot means ye, Commandant?”

“From the Fiefguard, my friend. I reckon they’ll soon return from Hensen, swaggering with heads held high and waggons wiggling with loot. But those sots’ll be too sotted from victory to see the snare abiding them at Balasthea. Should prove easy enough: parade the prey into their cage, and then... drop the doors shut.”

To this, the soldier stayed silent.

“Serves them right, I say,” I went on. “Stings my stomach every time I see those flaunting fools. You feel as I do, don’t you Morten?”

Slowly did he start nodding. “Y... y-yea, I-I feels it, yea.”

Soldiers oft find guard duty dull and damnable drudgery. Many would rather follow along on forays, to plunder riches and enlarge their names. And so is conceived a hierarchy amongst the soldiery, of attackers being at the top and the defending rest doomed to the bottom.

The Fiefguard followed this to a tittle, always sporting their supposed superiority over the fort-men. Such flagrancy, of course, earned the latter’s grating disgust, birthing between them friction of no small heat.

My thought, then, was to stoke that fire, as it were, hence my tempting Morten with a pretend ploy to pilfer the Fiefguard.

“But there’s the rub, my friend,” I sighed. “Coin alone ill-makes a flight less fraught. I need company. I need *women*.”

Another slow set of nods. “...Er... y-yea, I sees why, sir.”

Good. Very good.

Morten was beginning to pick his words, that he might pander to my increasing desperation. Where he once fidgeted frailly, he now stood at last upon the arena of negotiation. What remained was to lure him into outwitting me—with him none the wiser.

“But can you *help*, Morten? For *help* is all I beg of you,” I said pleadingly. “Pray seek a sound selection of Arbel’s women and whisk them to me. Please—you’re the only man I trust enough with this trouble.”

“But sir, er... I reckons only a fat an’ full coffer’s got coin ‘nough, if ye be wantin’ brothel-bints fer a whole journey, yea?”

I shook my head. “No matter. I’ll strip the Fiefguard of all their troves. That should fill coffers enough for a great many journeys, no doubt.”

“N-no doubt, indeed.”

“Of course, you’ll not go unrequited, Morten.”

“H... haha,” he half-smiled. “Oh, ye be too kind, Commandant.”

And Morten be a man too contemptuous to play along with the ungraced he so scorned. No, he himself was pretending, showing me his false spark of treachery.

This fidgeting fellow—over the past moment were his eyes stuck down-left. We Men are like to look up when tending to a truer answer, and down when a lie is upon our lips. And when guilt sits heavy on our hearts, we hook our eyes towards our indextrous hand.

Thus was Morten's a mind for the lie. Of course, it's all just a generality, this matter of trends of truth and untruth. But here it held water, for unwicked was the sweat upon Morten's meandering mien.

"So what's your mind, Morten? I ask not that you come with me. Two, three gainly gamesters be all I beg you bring," I pressed him. "Please, Morten. For me. We are *friends*, are we not?"

"Uh, ermm," he sighed, folding his arms. "W-wot *ever* shall I do..."

I had thought my theatrics thin of all credibility, but Morten's was no less crude. Two hams, hammering out deceitful diplomacy with all gravity—a masterclass in comedy, to be sure.

"Mm..." Morten moaned in thought. "...Yea. Yea, why not? Fer me friend!"

"Good man, Morten! You have my debt!"

There I beamed most awkwardly, whilst the man himself simpered amidst his sweat. Why, I could almost hear the standing ovation.

∴

After watching Morten gallop off to Arbel, Volker, Lise, and I retreated to a chamber within the fort keep. There in the dim, we faced one another to discuss what course our cause should take... and what hand the fates might deal us.

“Rolf,” Lise began, “the talk went well? Or...?”

“Well enough, I’d wager,” answered I.

Doubtless Morten would immediately divulge my defection to the margrave. And as well: my plans to pinch and pilfer the Fiefguard as they file through the fort on their glorious return. Only one of these strings strummed true, of course, but the margrave should be none the wiser. Thus I foresaw his answer being but one: the immediate mobilisation of his remnant men to recapture and secure Balasthea.

Ours, on the other hand, would be that of open war, to strike back the brutes directly as they come. Such was unavoidable. To ensure victory in the coming all-out assault on Arbel, its men must be whittled down as much as our knife-edges could suffer.

Two thousand—the number of the Fiefguard’s fallen at Hensen. A number of which veracity the margrave must mull over, but a number we ourselves knew to be true. Given that, were we to succeed in drawing out the remnant Fiefguard from their fastness at Arbel, and there in the open cull their ranks by ambush, then we carve out for ourselves

a preemptive advantage in our later attack on the fief-burgh.

And there would be witnessed a reverse of the battle of Hensen, a flipping of the gameboard—this was the result we sought, the battlefield we aimed to artifice. The Nafílim had defended their home at a disadvantage. Now it was the margrave's turn to quaff that cruel medicine, a brew of our own making, unbeknownst to him.

"We braves once savour'd much advantage. But the taste was taken from our tongues the day you don'd the commandant's coat," Volker reflected, looking at me. "How affrighting the fair winds be, that once again should we find ourselves in a vie for advantage—on what day but the very day you damn'd your kingdom and offer'd us your sword." He scoffed at the irony. "You be a wolf that moves the moon, Rolf."

"Affrighting, for true," echoed Lise.

"Nay, my part is small. The mightier merit invests you, Volker. Hensen stands now by the buttress of your bravery," I said. "Besides, not all the cards be laid yet: the deck is dire with *two* jokers, and both must move to our mind, lest a poor jest be made of our plans."

Jokers by the names of Morten and the Margrave Aaron Ström.

The latter likely already caught wind of the Fiefguard's defeat at Hensen. But at his other ear would soon be Morten, unknowingly feeding the margrave my worm of a lie: to wit, news of the Men's *victory* at the fólkheimr. A tiding with a sweeter tune, no doubt, but numbering only one of two, all told. Which shall earn the lord's heedance? Our scheme saw heavy need of his trusting to his pride than

his prudence, and so it was that our fortunes were borne upon Morten's shoulders, whether he knew it or no.

Given the margrave's mind and circumstance, more likely than not should he be inclined to Morten's mouth. But likeliness was smaller solace than certainty.

"Our hand finds frail challenge, I think. The winds do seem warmer to your bending, Rolf," Volker conjectured. "At the very least, that dolt of a Man earlier ought amount to little more than a pawn, one whose simple play we need not guess. For no doubt the defeat has wounded the pride of these Men, and this scheme offers them the too-sought salve of self-deception."

Self-deception, denial—powerful salves, indeed. Morten is a simple man of simple pleasures; to him, there is comfort in contemning an addle-pated ungraced. He thinks himself the eagle-eyed angler to have scried my naked scheme when he is sooner the fish, flailing with not fear, but euphoria for his biting the bait.

So it is, then, that the temptation to unmake my skein, to strop and stroke his pride, should prove a current too fierce for his fins to defy.

Though frankly, I did feel our feint overzealously zested.

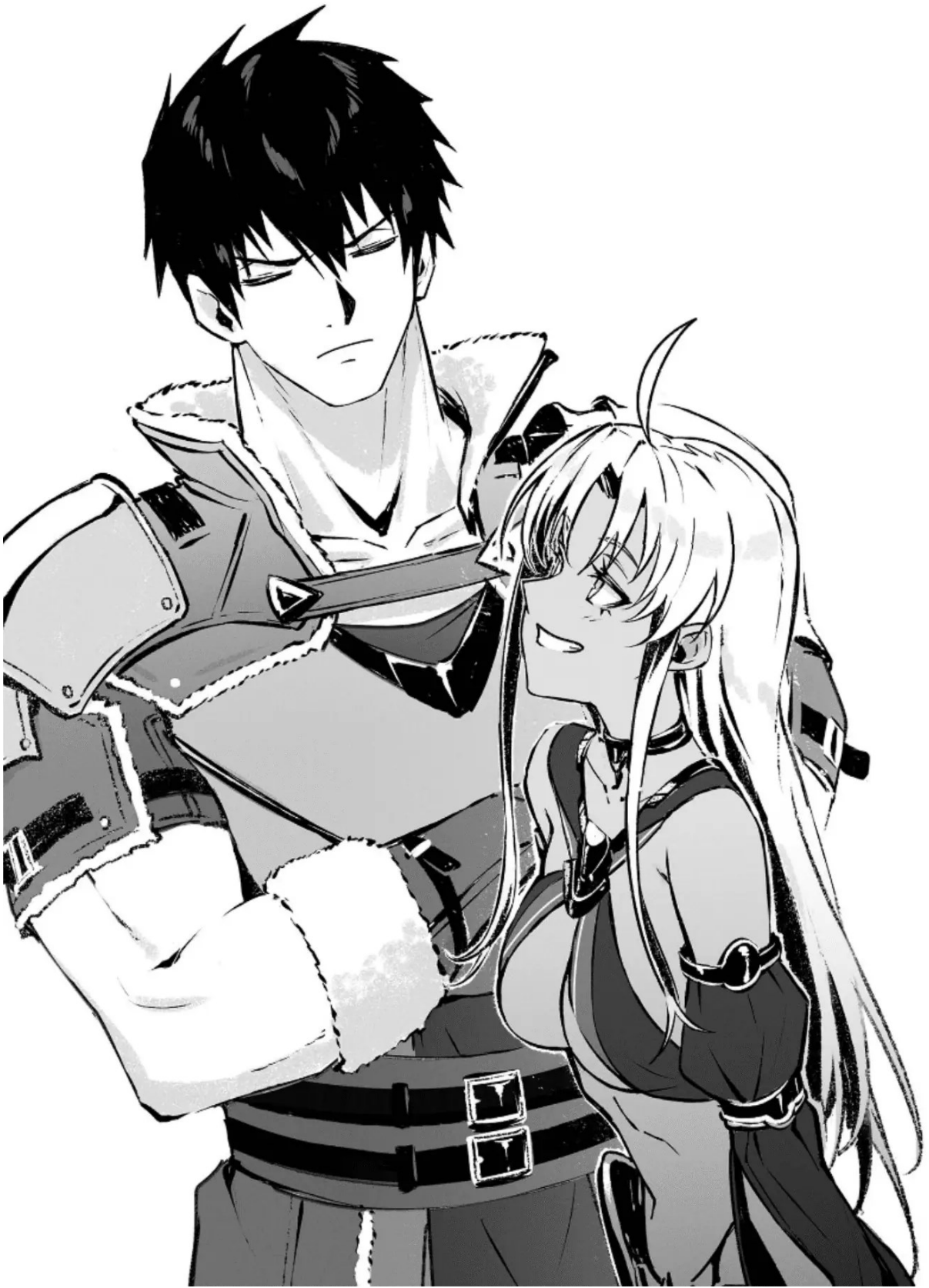
"Speaking of deception," I said, turning to the war-chief, "... *women*, Volker?"

The ploy was put together by myself, but it was Volker who added the finishing touches. Indeed, the inspiration to task Morten in finding for me the bawdy-women that I so "needed" came from no one else's mind but Volker's calculating own.

“A necessity. Details decide the day,” he asserted with not a flinch. I suppose “meticulousness” should be added to my measure of him. Thankfully it looked to have served us well, for it has given Morten exactly what he wanted: a sight of Rolf the reproachable gadabout.

“I say, ‘twas a part played perfect!” giggled Lise with a sidelong smirk. “A coxcomb of a character, a Man with more mind paid to women and mammon than the prizes of prudence—you *reeked* of the role, Rolf!”

I groaned. “Your compliment cuts deep...”



Thinking on it, she *was* quite livid upon our reunion, Lise. Could this be revenge, then? For my hailing her a “raging beast”?

“A warm wound, from Lise with love!” she prodded on. “You ought savour the sweet sting!”

“Edelfräulein,” Volker said after a slight sigh at the exchange, “our forces stand ready. We move now, or?”

His tone echoed with uncharacteristic tiredness, as though worn from many a winter of humouring the jarl’s daughter. Though it seemed her esteemed title of *Edelfräulein* had yet to unstick itself from Volker’s tongue.

“Right,” nodded Lise. “Rolf, you’ll not mind if everyone files into the fort?”

“Not at all.”

Suffice it to say, we had indeed marched along with the Nafílim “horde”. And “horde” be accurate enough: it comprised quite nearly the whole of Hensen’s hosts. The torches being twice-fold lit—*that* was the lie.

The next step was to welcome this bristling number into Balasthea and begin preparing at once for the coming clash.

“Best we temper ourselves for aught untoward,” I said. “Even should the margrave and his men move to our liking, it means little if we do not break them in battle.”

To this, the two nodded.

The capture and occupation of Arbel—such was our grand objective, and the next battle would serve as its opening blow.

Only, at this point, a certain soul was come to the fief-burgh. A soul I knew all too well, but one I never dared imagine would make an appearance—now, of all times.



Felicia's bosom was aboil.

Not once could she meet her brother.

Apprised of his absence by the men at Balasthea, Felicia thought then to pay a visit to his abode in Arbel. But there, too, did her search turn up naught. Why, she even whiled away the evening in the hollowness of his home, waiting for his return. And return he did, if only in his sister's reminiscences of him.

Where could he possibly be? To this moment were the Fiefguardsmen laying their lives on the line, that the people of Arbel might endure in peace. Yet aface the rigours and sacrifices of the soldiery, what was *her brother* doing, for his part?

Felicia bit her lip, barely able to leash in her ire and annoyance for her bumbling bloodkin. Yet a bloodkin he still was, and not before having a word with him did she dare make the journey back home. For in spite of her misgivings for him, she knew all too well that to abandon him was a blunder beyond all mending. In fact, it was this very realisation that had roused her to action and brought her to the far march of Ström, all to enquire and know her brother's mind.

But the days of his absence wore on. No less than half a week wheeled by, during which Felicia had taken lodging in

the fief-burgh. Today was no different: his residence seemed yet void of its rightful resident.

Felicia rounded the bend on the road to his home, thinking to have a closer look before heading off to visit Balasthea once more. And there, she at last found someone on the premises—many, in fact. Fiefguardsmen they were, standing guard about the porch of the residence.

An ill augury gripped her heart at once.

“Pardon,” she said to them, “what’s the meaning of this?”

†

“...No... inconceivable...”

Within the wide spaces of the margrave’s office sounded Felicia’s voice. Frail though it was, it echoed clean and clear through the stifling stillness. Many lips were pursed shut: namely those of the Fiefguard leadership, so gathered, too, in that wrung room.

And before them all was the margrave himself, sat at his great desk. Thoughts and more thoughts thudded in his head, whilst his cheeks and brows were bent in, as though a bitter bug had burst in between his grating teeth. Oh, bitter indeed, for in a short span had he received many a report, each either most ill or ill-mending his miserable mood.

The very first had come from a Fiefguardsman, freshly fled from Hensen. His most pained word: “defeat”. Not long

thereafter came a courier from Balasthea. His stab of a message: “the fort has fallen.” But that was not all, no, for sighted amongst a Nafílim delegation was the acting commandant himself—the ill-bred and misbegotten ungraced, Rolf Buckmann!

The hours following found the margrave grimly ungiven to ordered thoughts. And as if the chaos could not be any more mired, there came another man with a tumult of a tidings. Morten was his name, a footman of the fort, and his words brought new winds to the storm: that the Fiefguard had *not* failed at Hensen. Why, it was only feigned to appear that they had, and by whose hand but Rolf the rapsallion! That ungraced! There he was, working in the weeds with the Nafílim! Plotting to trip a trap upon the Fiefguard as they funnelled through the baileys of Balasthea!

An unexpected turn, no doubt. But the margrave now had a hard choice of moves to make, each buttressed by reports of two opposing “truths”: of whether his precious Fiefguard was victorious or utterly vanquished. The decision weighed dearly on him.

“‘Inconceivable’?” to Felicia he said, bent with burden upon his chair. “*What* exactly, Brigadier? The failure of my many men? Or of your brother, who is like to have bedded with those beastlings and brought Balasthea to its knees?”

“Why, the latter, Your Excellency,” she answered. “No folly could befoul a Man so, that he be moved to mete treachery upon his own kin. Wayward may be that brother of mine, but lost to love of our foe? I should think not.”

“And yet lost be his wits to Man’s mighty wisdom,” the margrave countered. “We’ve spoken of this, have we not?”

Your brother *detests* the very divestment of the Nafílim, my dear Brigadier.”

“B... but...” she stammered unto silence, scarce able to debate the point. For somewhere deep in her heart, she felt that—though to do so is most preposterous—her brother might just be enough of an eccentric to treat with the Nafílim.

“Your will, m’liege?” asked a Fiefguard commander.

The margrave rubbed his chin. In actuality, this matter merely pretended at complexity, for it all boiled down to two choices. In fact, it might as well be but one and a half.

Were it true that the foraying Fiefguard had fallen at Hensen, then it meant a hundred score soldiers were snuffed from the margrave’s military. Not with sudden frailness could his remnant men ride to meet Rolf’s challenge. What was left to him was little, then, save to stand fast, speedily replenish his ranks, and mount a desperate resistance.

But what of the contrary? What if his mighty men were, in fact, triumphant at Hensen? Then it was woe that would await them on their return, with Rolf the wolf ready on the pounce. About the men would the gates of Balasthea be shut, with showers of arrows and magicks as their homecoming welcome. An assault inescapable, but not a fate inevitable—were the margrave to accept this scenario as truth, then he had but to sortie his men at once and rout Rolf before the triggering of his trap.

Accept the uncertain doom of his men, or avert their other doom soon and certain to come. In the end, it was his station as margrave that left Aaron Ström with all but the latter choice.

He had reason enough. The martial milieu of late found mightier momentum in the charge of Men. The advantage, then, was adamantly the Fiefguard's—thus it was folly, an affront to reality itself, to fancy so fearsome a force having met its end at the enfeebled fólkheimr.

“Sally the soldiery,” the margrave spoke at last. “Go—bear down upon Balasthea, and break Buckmann and his beastly braves!”

Such were the lord's orders. And sound they were to any right mind, not least to the leaders gathered in the room, who, receipt of the margrave's mandate, then all filed out of the office.

Only, Felicia yet remained.

In the midst of the shuffle, she turned to the lord.

“Excellency, pray lend me leave to march, as well!”

The margrave's gaze narrowed. “A bloody dagger hides in your brother's hands, Brigadier. Yet still you see not its sanguine gleam? *My* eyes see his fingers for a foe's, thus no friend nor family of his ought be given chance to join the charge.”

“Nay—my eyes wish only to see the truth, Your Excellency,” Felicia insisted, “of whether my brother has kept his bonds... or cut them altogether.”

Not so could he be rotted to his deepest reaches. Not yet was he withered of all worthiness. Belief was still his to deserve.

But were it so that his betrayal be true...

Were it so that his wits be broken beyond all repair and redemption...

Were it so that devilry be his new indulgence, that he would dare set his sword upon his family, his former *fiancée*...

...

Myriad emotions now haunted Felicia's mien.

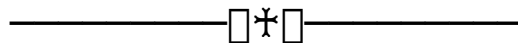
Feelings of fierce frustration, of wishing dearly to spare her brother a dire death, of... oh, the many sentiments storming in that heart of hers. Many, yet muddied, missing all distinction and description.

The margrave stared on at her. A glint was in his eyes—the cold light of intrigue.

“...Very well, then. Your leave is lent,” he relented. “But *marching* is all you shall do. This battle be ours and ours alone to wage, Brigadier *Buckmann*.”

Almost gasping, Felicia then curtsied. “Of course, Your Excellency.”

And so was decided the sallying of the soldiery from Arbel unto Balasthea, with Felicia to follow the Fiefguard's file.



All was tense at Balasthea. Expectation twanged in the morrowing air, till there came a sentinel's cry from high up

the watchtower. As if whipped into action, the baileys and battlements both bustled with new activity.

It was spotted at last.

Movement—a wriggling buzz flooding from the gates of far Arbel.

I hastily climbed the watchtower. Peering yonder from the top, I at last knew then that fairer horizons awaited us: the margrave had indeed bitten Morten's unwitting bait. And just as I'd hoped, Arbel's remnant Fiefguardsmen were now marching straight to this fort. Theirs was the martial mind to smite the Nafílim occupiers of Balasthea, all to stop what they believed to be a pitfall waiting to swallow up their comrades on their return from Hensen.

"Mm... fifty score, thereabouts?" Lise reckoned their number, having followed me up the tower. "Their hand's shown; they've played as you predicted, Rolf. Cull their count here, and the rest unfolds unfraught."

She had the right of it. Though it was a large force that had harried Hensen, it did not form the full brunt of the Fiefguard, no. A lesser number had remained at Arbel, but "lesser" was little comfort, for were we to attack the fief-burgh at this moment, the home advantage would sorely be theirs. The walls, the cityways, the defences—too much of Arbel would bristle with brutes and ambushes at every corner. In such a battle, our mettle would most certainly diminish till our unmaking.

What was needed, then, was to drag the Fiefguard out from the safety of their city and sap their strength and numbers before the real deal at Arbel proper.

“Would that they keep the hand they’re dealt,” I hoped aloud, taking to hand a longbow and an arrow in preparation, “for long enough, at least.”

From the look of their movements, the Fiefguardsmen fancied a quick, engulfing raid upon Balasthea, with our number forced to stand its ground. A most sound prediction, if not obvious. We had all the fort defences at our disposal; surely we should make use of them.

Yet that was precisely why we chose the contrary.

Balasthea’s bulwarks protected it from all sides, indeed, but those very bulwarks had hitherto defended only against Nafílim spears and spells. Not once have they suffered an attack from *Arbel* itself. Yet such was precisely our present predicament, and no one here, not even myself, knew how best to tackle it. And that’s to say nothing of the braves themselves, who have never before manned this fort’s defences for their own purposes.

But all was not lost. Our plan was to eschew the stronghold’s strengths altogether and strike the Fiefguard out in the open, right as they draw close to our gates. A long highroad linked both fort and fief-burgh directly, with its course increasingly sheltered by hills and greenery as it neared its terminus. From such cover would our braves pounce upon the Fiefguard amidst their march and fight them in their confusion.

“Timing’s of the essence,” Lise reminded me.

“Essence and more,” I nodded. “Only one chance, now.”

All caution and concentration were poured into my peering of the enemy march. Only when their formation was thinnest could we lunge and strike their flanks. Divide and

conquer was our game—bore holes into their file, fragment and drive them to scatter, and cull them in the chaos.

On and on our watch went, the moments moving like molasses. The tail of the Fiefguard's file had long left the vicinity of Arbel, whilst its head had crossed into cutting range of our waylayers.

"Rolf—the tower quivers," Lise said at last, alarmed. "We spring now, or?"

"Nay, not yet."

Indeed, the Fiefguard's thousand footfalls and hoofbeats were now near enough to subtly rattle the watchtower, and as well, inspire unease in Lise's voice. Not that I could blame her; only a scant few braves were to be found in the fort proper; all the rest laid in wait beside the road. Should the Fiefguard break through, then our situation would turn most sour, to say the least.

Still, I dared not let our dire defences nip at my nerves. Those who live by war ought fear not death—even as it rushes in as a flickering blade upon the flesh. Of course, never should one neglect to mitigate the risks at hand, but some are as indelible as they are necessary, and they must needs be met with necessary nerve. Victory otherwise remains forever a fantasy.

"*Mm...*" Lise fretted. "N... now?"

I shook my head. "Just a little closer."

Closer and closer still, a centipede parading down the country path. That was the Fiefguard, and fast was my stare upon it, waiting and waiting for the exact instant its file was

stretched thinnest. A centipede indeed, barbed and bristly with swords and pennoned spears, creeping its way close.

Lise's frantic eyes flashed to me. "R-Rolf!"

"Now!" I shouted. Rearing back, I nocked the arrow upon the string, drew it taut, and aimed the longbow. Fingers let loose. The shaft shot out of sight. Its target: the sky.

Ffyyeeuuu—!

The shrill whistle of the signal arrow as it arched through the pale blue. At once, the Fiefguard collectively flinched and turned their puzzled eyes to the sky. But not a second sooner, and the Nafílim braves lurched from their lurking spots and lunged upon the Men.

"Uwhaakh!?"

The air filled with the Fiefguard's screams as their flanks were affrighted by sudden foes. Theirs was a march mustered at haste; an easy attack upon the fort was their intention, but the very planning of it was put off till they were filed on the field. Whatever progress they made was for naught: battle was breaking all around them, well beyond both Balasthea's walls and their expectation.

Morten's words had damned them to their undoing. For to believe them was to believe that ours was but a force of few. So it was that none of the Men could have foreseen offence as being our hand in this game.

"The lie had too lovely a lustre, looks like," I said.

"They bit the bait for true..." Lise stared in wonder, "... and leapt right into our bow!"

Time and space played to our great advantage. The set-up, the spots, the springing—all contributed to the cacophony before us all: the Fiefguard's file was perforated and fragmented, its soldiers sundered and isolated from the formation. Their screams echoed manyfold.

"B-bloody 'ell!"

"Captain! Your orders!? Captain!!"

Fiefguard swords swished and swung in panick. Nafílim spears stabbed in swift answer. Steeds neighed and flailed wildly, flinging their riders from their saddles. The unhorsed Men: unmade by Nafílim hammers.

"Let not one flee!" Volker's voice thundered from afar. "Tine them in, cut them off! Fight their flanks! Give them fear!"

I thought then just as I had at Hensen: the war-chief truly was a commander of supreme exception. With him at the helm, the braves battled unbrokenly, all whilst fanning the Fiefguard's frenzy to pitches higher and higher still.

"Impressive," I thought aloud.

"Rolf! At the gates!" Lise cried.

I found fast her finger pointing down below. Sure enough, a detachment of Fiefguardsmen had found their way to the fore of our gates. In seeking the most opportune timing to mount the ambush, I'd let the point of the enemy file enter striking distance of the fort.

The fault was mine.

But one well-accounted for.

“I’ll handle this,” said I, turning away. “The watch is yours, Lise. If any queerness comes, give the signal!”

“I will!” she answered, after which I then jumped—down from the top of the watchtower. “W-wait—!”

Lise’s surprised yelp, heard as I descended the great height, but not through empty air, no. Hands gripping the ladder rails, I slid steadily down towards the bailey. Nearing the ground, I kicked off and landed with a large thud. But no sooner did I draw the soot-black blade and bolted straightway to the gates.

“Open up!” I shouted, earning more surprise, this time from the gatekeeping brave. But little time was wasted as he then unlatched the crossbar and pushed against the great barrier. Groaning open, the gates revealed a sight rife with Fiefguardsmen, two of whom slipped through. The first to meet my eyes met also my blade.

“Hweh?”

Such be the low utterance of many a soldier at the moment of their unmaking. Few are they who leave behind words worth remembering. This man failed to join that mighty minority. So, too, did the one near him.

“Aagh!”

With two vanguards vanquished, I rushed on with unrelenting speed. Beyond the barrier, ten and more foes yet remained for the maiming.

“Close up once I’m clear! Straightway!” I shouted again to the Nafilim guards.

Putting the gates behind me, I charged and challenged the Fiefguardsmen at the fray. Dragon-burnt steel drove through air and flesh, and by the time the gates finally boomed to a close, five Men had fallen to my blade.



I was stunned.

Stunned, and standing in wonder at what had unfolded before my eyes: Rolf, as if beckoned by the spirit of daring, took a leap down from the very top of the watchtower—a height of no less than seventy Füße.

That giant of a Man, once in my company, now gone like the wind—a vanishing taking with it all words from my lips.

His standing and watching of the battlefield was calm and still till not a moment ago. Even as our enemy marched nearer and nearer unto our midst, Rolf had remained both the undisturbed boulder and the eagle keen on the perfect swoop.

His decisiveness astounded, his immovability moved. How deep in awe I was.

I recalled then the telling of his story on the night of our meeting in Hensen. Of how, on fault of ill-communing with Yoná, godhead of Man, he was made to live through winters cold of gentleness and pale of society.

But 'twas nonetheless an unembellished telling: though he wore much pain, Rolf recounted his woes as more their

watcher and less their liver, never painting the truth with deeper grief nor coaxing undue pity. His past was laid out as bare as could be. Yet Men hold their Deiva to be absolute; this was the further truth, and no doubt was in me that their zealotry exacted from Rolf tolls and toils beyond common suffering.

In spite of it all, this wayward Man lost not his way. On and on, he strove. On and on, he fought, never once casting away his sword or his honour.

A marvel of a Man, Rolf. A marvel seldom beheld, a Man seldom bred. That was my reckoning of him. And as if his valiance could wear not a brighter lustre, his was also the acumen of a sharp commander, as shown on this day. I realised then the realness of the power that so delivered Balasthea from the brink over these past few moons... and with it, a peculiar solace in being by his side, as though I were sat in the soft shade of a great tree, amidst the vividness of a midsummer noon.

But that idyll was only a daydream. This was a battlefield, and our foes, though diminishing with each passing moment, had managed to gain our walls.

'...Rolf...! At the gates...!' I had said.

'...I'll handle this...' he answered swift. *'...The watch is yours, Lise... If any queerness comes... give the signal...!'*

His words revealed to me the sort of soldier he was: a commander and frontline fighter both. The same as I.

Words most warming. Eyes most encouraging. Once more had Rolf given to me comfort of a kind ill-belonging on a battlefield. But another moment, and those words, those eyes, then vanished right from my midst.

'...W-wait...!'

A yelp from my lips, teased out by pure surprise.

'Twas a watchtower whereupon I stood, no less; its very top, whence could be gleaned the lay of the land for a Meile and more beyond the fort walls. Only a craver of death would leap so free from this great height, but Rolf had done just that.

Astonished, to the opposite parapet I went, only to find him asail down the ladder, blunting his fatal descent with hands strained against the rails. Then he landed, thumping the air like a full-swung drumbeat and rousing in his wake a plume of dust.

Wonderment struck me once more, to see so large a figure as Rolf's alight with such grace from so high a place—a figure that next broke forth at once, drawn blade in hand, striding legs whisking him beyond the opening gates. There, with vivid ferocity, did Rolf then bring new battles upon the Fiefguard.

And so was I left stunned and quieted.

Such happenings, at too great a speed. A hare outrunning my ken.

Just now was he here. Not more than a minute ago. Standing, and gleaning all sight and sound from the battlefield. But a blink, and Rolf was next in the thick of it, far down and far ahead. His sword danced, his mettle shone. Bidding the gates be closed, he pressed deeper into the fray, drawing the enemy vanguard away from the fort. And amidst such action, one by one he threw down his foes with mighty swings of black steel.

“That’s ‘im! The traitor!” came a cry from the enemy masses. A field commander’s, by the sound of it; already were they keen on Rolf. “Close ranks! Kill ‘im quick!”

Spears glinted. A maw of many fangs gnashing at Rolf.

“No...!”

At once I tensed, clenching my teeth.

I had no doubt: Rolf’s strength was true. He well-proved it in Hensen. This, my mind knew. But my heart... how it wailed for the scene, for the ally waylaid by rows of spears, each thirsting for his death.

These foes were able enough. Encircling slow ‘round Rolf, they maintained formation amidst the din of other frays about them. Were I their mark, I would break away and reset the situation. Indeed; back off and be on the prowl for a gap in their ranks. And once an opening shows, lunge in from the flank—

“Wha...!”

—but Rolf’s was a different thought. With sword poised, he charged—straight at the bristling phalanx.

The spears answered, closing in on him like a whirlpool.

I gasped. My breaths stopped.

But then: a mystery.

The spearpoints sprang upon him—all of them—yet bit no more than the very air about his body.

“How...” I exhaled in amazement. ‘Twas as though the steel tips were sent against the repelling side of a lodestone

—nay, as though the spears themselves *feared* Rolf.

The surprise on my face was clear-echoed on those of Rolf's very foes.

But of course, the truth behind their failed offence was more mundane: Rolf had mere-espied—with all immediacy—the dead zone of their spears and seized the moment. Mundane, for true. Even a curtain of readied spears is not without its gaps; such weapons in such a formation could do little else but strike straight, hence 'tis beyond no imagining that there might arise inside it some indefensible void.

What proved beyond mundane was Rolf himself: not in the common soul could be found valour enough to endeavour the feat on peril of instant death. How many winters of rigour and hard-mastered study did Rolf endure, I wonder, to reach so sublime a state?

“Ryaahh!”

A thunderous roar from Rolf. A heaving swing of the soot-steel. Blackness tore through flesh, redness spewed through the air. To the ground hurled many foes.

“Eeaaghh!?”

“Men down, men down! We need more hands!”

And in the wake: a screaming swell from the Fiefguard. More of the vanguard near the gates answered the desperate call and scrambled in Rolf's direction. But defying their great number, he slashed away at the tide of Men.

Elsewhere, far in the distance, fought Volker and his brave-host. Their striving was as an iron grip, never letting fly the advantage hard-earned by our roadside ambush. By

this point, they were whipping the Fiefguard into fleeing, laying low Men where they could and leaving the rest to scatter in misery.

All facets of this great fight, then, shone with our impending victory.

“Rraaahh!”

And breaking the clouds was Rolf’s voice, boisterous and cutting, but clarion and baritone. A rich voice full-bent on the fight, resounding strong through the air, that even atop the watchtower whence I stood, it carried and echoed well into my bosom and belly both.

In concert to his vociferation was the sword of soot—and what trailed its many arcs.

Fine wisps of black, brushed in crescent moonstrokes, only to thin away into naught like a mist. Left behind were bodies rent by the wolfsteel’s bite and Rolf’s towering form—gallant, and beautiful, even.

“Fall back! Fall back!!”

Cries from the Fiefguard, bellowed now to much repetition. With their numbers grievous-culled, the Men began retreating en masse, like a tide receding from the shores whence they came.

Victory was ours, then.

Victory for the prelude to our attack on Arbel.

Felicia trembled.

Trust was not in her—not for the ghastly sight reflected in her ruby eyes.

“Our line fails! We need troops!”

“Retreat’s bar’d!! Make way, ye lack-wits!!”

The Fiefguard—full-pressed into a flailing panick! They came as bawcocks, bold and brazenly set upon retaking Balasthea, only to be taken by sore surprise! For ambush was their welcome, played out in the clear open, before a single foot of theirs ever broke the bailey’s soil. Pinched in by Nafílim fighters, the Men were split and scattered, soon finding themselves easy prey for the hard hunt.

To Felicia, perched upon a hill near the rearmost ranks, such was the vivid vista presented. A vista of failed wits and perilous error. What impossibility is this? Who is it that leads the Nafílim host? The questions urged the brigadier to break her gaze away from the grimness and look to the fort far ahead.

Soon enough, she spotted a peculiarity: a figure, flying down from the watchtower whence the whistling arrow was fired moments ago. Nay, not from so high a height could a man fly without dire need of mending thereafter. Perhaps the figure *fell*?

Pondering, Felicia next found the fort’s gates gaping open, from the crack of which rushed out that very same figure.

Her lips gave a gasp.

There was in that figure, that distant, sword-swinging silhouette, features that stoked a fear in her. Features, faint from so far away, yet gravely familiar to her eyes: a stature most outstanding in its height and stoutness.

The reality she had so repudiated returned to her thoughts with thorns bristling anew.

“No... ‘twas true...?” she whispered, “...*Brother...?*”

Anear, the rearguard swelled with sallow soldiers, freshly fleeing the butchery yonder.

“Back! Fall Back! Now!!”

Theirs was no longer an onward march, but a stampede back to the safety of the fief-burgh. Doubtless a cowardly, if not calculated choice—and as well, the sole path to survival, for they had not the mettle to muster against so sudden a disadvantage. The vanguards who might have sniffed a chance at bearing down upon Balasthea were now themselves hounds whimpering back with tails tucked betwixt their shivering haunches... or bodies ready for the unmarked burial.

“Fall back! Fall back!!”

Scores of like screams scratched endlessly at the air. On that day, the Fiefguard failed and flew back to Arbel, their numbers dwindled by no small fraction.



“Rolf!” cried a voice. “P-Pardon! A moment! If it pleases you!”

To it I turned and tarried, having been on my way to meet Lise and Volker. The battle was ended; the braves bustled fervently as they filed back into the fort. Out of the crowd emerged a young fellow of a Nafíl, looking not much older than I during my first days at the Order.

“It does,” I answered above the clamour, watching as he quickly came by. “What is it?”

“Th-this victory, it is owed to you! Our losses are little—not without your command could we’ve seen this day!” he sunnily said, face flustered and almost breathless. But having been worn by winters of lambastings rather than laudings, I couldn’t help but feel a bit flustered myself.

“Your praise gladdens the ears,” I returned. “...Though you’d best leave them for Lise’s and Volker’s. It’s their skill and command that carried our cause.”

“Oh, y-yes, of course! Our leaders’ll find no frail love from me, they won’t! But yours, Rolf—your shoulders shrink not beside theirs, if you get my meaning!” he expounded with passion. “Just as you didn’t shrink when the enemy gained the gates! ‘Mighty’ be my best word for it! What with your charging their file, and felling them with that fey sword of yours!”

I itched with unease at those words, as I felt my fencing unworthy of any acclaim yet. But to hear that I was “mighty”, that I did not “shrink” in the face of my foe—that well-earned my gratitude. For courage was my one regard I wished most to earn remembrance: in combat, in character, above all else and all others.

“And when you bade the gates be shut upon your exit—I feel a fable was unfurled before my eyes, if you know what I mean!” the fervent fellow continued. “The boldest of the brave, breaking into peril to protect the bastion! The stuff of legends!”

Joining the fray—not exactly the deed of a reasoned commander, I should admit, but I let it be. This youth was pouring into his praise his very heart; it’d be callous of me to throw cold water on him now.

“I only did as was demanded, but thank you,” I relented. “You know my name—what of yours?”

“Ah, aye! I’m Bruno!” he answered, bowing. “A pleasure!”

“Bruno, good lad,” I said back, presenting a hand to him. “Let’s give our all next we battle—together.”

“O-of course! Together!” And with both his own, he shook mine. A hale warmth was in his spirited grip. “Till then! Fair winds comfort you!”

And off he went with a spring in his steps. Soon in his place were both Lise and Volker, approaching with wisps of wonder in their eyes.

“Quite the devotee there,” remarked Lise.

“One I’m honoured to have, if true. It was a glad meeting,” I admitted. Cast upon me were yet stares of no small number, each nursing embers of doubt. I recalled then of Kunz. Of meeting him in Hensen, of being pressed by his arrant rage, his ill-salved sorrow. His was the smouldering stare most unforgettable of all.

A comfort, then, to know that in some like Bruno, there burnt a fire of a friendlier ardour.

“His compliments be not queer, I think,” Volker added. “Many braves take heed of your sound succour at Hensen, Rolf—to note little of both your bloodless felling of this fastness and the fierceness of your fighting on this day.”

“Not just this day, then,” I proclaimed, looking intently at busied braves. “In all to come, I’ll strive to win their vouching.”

Through battle. Through resolute and unrelenting battle. For their cause, for their sacrifices—their future. And in so doing earn their trust, at last. This I trusted to be the rightwise way. Much hard work, then, laid ahead.

“Well... al-already you’ve won some, I’d say,” stammered Lise, curiously quiet. “A fair fight you’ve waged for us, Rolf. Most fair—brave even, and... and bea... b-beautiful... I-I confess.”

“‘Beautiful’?” I remarked, surprised. “I see. Glad to know there be a glint of beauty in my bladework, if one as beautiful as yourself vouches for—”

“*Hya!?*” she yelped, loudly and out-of-the-blue.

Was I rude, perchance? Likely so, looking at Lise. Splendid; once again I’ve let my mouth run off.

“Ehr, V-Volker! Y-your sweat was much succour itself, wasn’t it!?” she said, turning asudden to the war-chief. The topic had turned sour on her tongue, it seemed. “Mine was quite the easy task thanks to you!”

“As was mine,” answered Volker, grinning faintly. “A gainsome hand it was that Rolf dealt us. I had but to play as promised.”

Not as gainsome as he touted it to be, I should say. Nonetheless, all had gone to plan, for our foes, too, had played obediently the hand of our dealing. Time was a luxury lost to them; had they any more of it, wisdom might’ve cooled their heads and inspired them to the possibility of an ambush. And as well, the falsity of Morten’s report. All the better for us, then, that they sooner heeded haste than hesitation.

Foremost in the margrave’s mind was surely Morten’s telling of the Fiefguard’s triumphant return from Hensen. If it were a backstabbing trap that awaited them at Balasthea, then speed should’ve seen them saved. And so it was that the lord let loose his remaining men to trounce our “trap”, sparing time for neither prudence nor planning. No, not even for an investigation into the veracity of the two opposing reports... nor for properly organising his troops, for that matter.

“You well-whip’d our foes to a fever’d haste, Rolf—horses hying to a cliff-edge their eyes had scant time to see, as it were,” Volker went on. “A gesture of genius, I admit.”

“But with your chase, they had no chance of changing course, Volker,” I returned. “Your command was most commendable; that’s my admittance.”

“Let us leave it at that, then. Pelting such praises as we do only passes precious time.”

“You have a point,” I relented, chuckling. I felt then a smile growing on my face—slight, but warm with gladness.

On the side was Lise, also smiling at us, if not rather awkwardly.



Coldly from his office did the margrave take in the ill-tiding. Yet again did the word “defeat” nip his nerves. The sorry sight of his Fiefguard, retreating from their rout, crushed all comfort that denial and self-deception might have afforded him.

Long had he held them in high regard, his military men. The Fiefguard: mighty defenders of this march of Ström. The honour was well-warranted. For many a time have they forayed bravely into Nafílim country and came back brimming with hard-earned boons. Why, the margrave even fancied them no less fearsome than the knights of the Orders.

Such pride—now all but pulverised.

Rolf’s was but a small force, a pack of Nafílim no larger than a nipple of a legion. *Those* were Morten’s words. Oh, the lies laced in them! And if lies they were, so it must be that the margrave’s forayers were indeed hewn down at Hensen.

...So it must be that the victors of that vying, vicious as they were bristlingly abundant, were now come to his doorstep.

Hensen, then, was a reeking failure of a raid. Would that he trusted to the contrary! Not the maunderings of Morten

the fool, no, but the fled Fiefguardsmen's grovelling details of their defeat! A bitter truth beholding the loss of a hundred-score soldiers!

Now were the tables turned. *Now* did the Nafílim mean to march on Arbel, aggression against which the fief-burgh might have had shields enough to guard... had the margrave not bitten the bait so capriciously. His losses only seemed to mount: of the thousand soldiers he had sent to break Balasthea today, not much more than three-hundred returned to Arbel alive.

A force once thrice-thousand strong, now nine-times decimated. And amongst the remnants themselves were the wounded and battle-unworthy; the "small force", then, was not Rolf's, no—it was the margrave's.

By such meagre numbers shall Arbel be ill-delivered from this dire plight. The realisation racked and grated at the margrave to no end.

Bang!—upon the desk: a furious fist.

"Damn it all!!" barked the lord, after which a Fiefguard commander then entered the room.

"M'liege..." he said sheepishly.

"I *know*," sighed the margrave. "We are cornered—defence be our only road in this ruction."

"What of Central?" the commander suggested. "Might we seek their succour, m'liege?"

"Already a courier bears my call to Redelberne, but it shall be days ere deliverance comes. *Days!*"

Days, indeed. Deadly and terrible days of defending against the Nafílim with just an enfeebled Fiefguard. And in that struggle, Arbel would fold long before its walls were aught more than a distant twinkle in the eyes of Central's reinforcements. The foe, then, seemed the clear and uncontested victor, even as the horns of battle were yet unblown.

"Nay... the last card lies yet unplayed," hissed the margrave, as though relenting after being wrung dry of all pride. "The sellswords of Zaharte—they shall see this through."

Heretofore had the margrave defended his fief with naught but the soldiery of this land. He well-wore the feat as a prideful pin, but today was the day it was torn from his lapel, and to grope after it would imperil the whole of the province itself. So instead, he sought the services of the foresaid free company, which, on this occasion, so happened to be sojourning within Ström's borders.

"Ah, but of course! The vaunted Zaharte Battalion!"

Sunlit expectation scintillated through the commander's voice, a clear contrast to his lord's contempt. Rightfully so, for the mercenaries of Zaharte were highly regarded. Though they branded themselves a battalion, their number hardly beseemed the term: not more than a hundred was their count, yet quality corroborated their ferocity, enough to rival a real battalion in strength.

Foremost amongst them were the Östbergs, the twin heads of the horde. Brother and sister they were, and in the minds of all Londosians, readily renowned as a force to be reckoned with upon the battlefield.

Such free companies roamed the realm, seeking coin for combat wheresoever they went. From time to time would they tarry in a province before braving the wilderness once more. That the Zaharte Battalion of fame would find Ström its waterhole for this whirlwind of a while was, to the margrave, a windfall, without a doubt.

“Indeed. An envoy of theirs arrives presently,” revealed the lord. “We must join with their muddied hands and rally our remnants for a reprisal. By my very soul shall this land be delivered—as Yoná is my witness.”

“As it shall, m’liege!”

In invoking the holy name of the Deiva did the margrave attempt to buoy his buried spirits. Yet buried they remained. Irritation, regret, wrath—spiteful worms all wriggling and writhing in his clouded bosom.



The past.

In remembering do I relive pain.

From my heart: all the hurt. Springing, sprouting, stinging.

Even amidst the mirth of many other memories, fair and fond. Even as enthroned in me was a childhood spent blissfully with Brother and Emilie both.

Beside it all sat the hurt. Ever in my heart, unwaning,
unwithering.

*'...Mingle not with that thing... You are our hope now,
Felicia... Our next-in-line... Do choose your company—
wisely...'*

Such was Father's bidding.

'Twas that dark day.

The day Brother was received at the Roun of Orisons. A
day that changed all that was and all yet to come.

Why? I thought to myself. Again and again. Over and
over.

Brother...

Ever was he the apple of everyone's eyes. Everyone,
save our Deiva.

How?

How did such travesty chance upon us? Upon Brother?

A mistake.

That's all. Just a simple mistake. 'Twas what I wished it
to be. Dearly, and more dearly still.

Yet Yoná yields no mistakes.

As She is not wont to err, so She is our Deiva, one and only. A truth plain to every eye. And if the fault lies not in Her, then so it must in Brother. Thus was he branded the black sheep of Her herd. A stigma in our midst.

'...Consort with traitors to the Deiva and you are like to share in their filth...'

Mother's words.

A warning to keep away from my own brother, conveyed most clearly to my ears. Even though 'twas clearer still that, up to the day of the rites, Brother was, to her, a son most beloved.

...Even though "my pride and joy" was oft what she said of him.

On the day of his departure to the Order, I could not send him off as I would've liked.

Rather, I wasn't allowed. And so I made due from a distance. Through my chamber window, I watched Brother far below as he prepared to depart.

The carriage was parked in waiting. Waiting by the manor gates. Waiting to whisk him away to the Order headquarters.

Emilie was present, as well.

Standing amidst a crowd, all gathered to celebrate the first step on her new journey. Amongst them were her parents, her servants—even little Maria, youthful handmaiden that she was. To Emilie went their warmth, their praise, their pride... their pain in parting from her so.

Whilst nearby was my brother.

...Standing amidst company as cold as 'twas empty. Mother and Father were present, but had nary a mind to see him off. They instead meant to make certain he would be gone for good. And just like that, with not a soul to bid him farewell, Brother began to board the carriage.

But as he did, he paused... and turned my way.

"...ah!"

I lurched closer and leant on the window, as though hurried by my heart. That I might be full-found by his eyes. That he might know—

—away his look went.

Mother had struck him across the face.

'...Don't you dare even look at Felicia...! Our dear heir needn't suffer your profane gaze...! Have you no shame...!?'

Even from my chamber, high and far, were those words most audible. Such was Mother's indignance.

Yet I heard also a tremble in her treble.

The sound of a sobbing voice. The voice of a mother believing herself betrayed by her child. The child she had nurtured with so much of her own love.

After a brief apology, Brother then boarded the carriage. On and on I watched as it set off, wheeling away down the avenue, till it vanished into the horizon.

From then on, just as Brother's life was upheaved, so, too, was mine.

The education, the esteem, the expectation he had long endured... all were now mine to suffer.

'...This is Felicia... Our daughter... and our dear heir...'

'...My...! Fairest Felicia... an honour and pleasure both...!'

There was yet a year left till my own enlistment in the Order. A year filled with aristocratic functions, of meeting with the Buckmann barony's myriad personages of power. Of stiff and shallow association with many-masked eminences.

Will I be as them one day...?

Nonetheless, more and more was I wearied by those wasting days.

The conveyances, the courtesies, the protocols, the etiquettes; trivialities I'd only ever learnt in passing—all of them now required my mastership down to the tiniest minutia. There was little time for leisure. The Buckmann brand was all-consuming; a terrible weight full-borne upon just my two shoulders.

Beyond mastering manners, there were also studies of many subjects. Any waking minute spent at the manor was a minute of education, of discipline, of review. My chamber seemed no longer my own. Faceless tutours came and went with the turning of the hour. Such were my days.

'...Sharply, now...' one of them had said. '...Lag here... and it shall be the wastrel's lot awaiting you...'

That “wastrel” being none other than Brother, for certain. And just like Mother, more certain again was this tutour's former praise for Brother. Frequent and glowing praise—now but insults, snide and shaded.

'Twas a matter beyond my mould to mend. Yet never did it cease to gnaw at me, the nonsense of it all.

The other tutours, too, doled out like disregard. But of them, the theologian fumed most with hate for Brother. By his words, he'd always felt Brother to be rather pale of respect for our Deiva.

By my own measure, Brother had ever and always mastered his studies, no matter the subject, for he hated none of them—not even theology. But to think, that lurking in the lack of hate was the absence of respect...

...this, I couldn't understand.

We lambs of Yoná must needs always pay our respects to our Deiva, whether through awe or adoration or aught else. Such has ever been our way. How, then, did Brother go astray?

Be that as it may, I very soon lost all luxury to worry for him so. Each and every day found me breathless and bewildered with business of myriad sorts. Boulders of duty

as Buckmann's only heir, pressing me with a weight once borne by Brother like a feather upon a finger. A weight I shouldn't have suffered had he not been disinherited. Though hardly a weight that begat in me a grudge of any sort.

But somewhere, deep down inside, below all waking thought, a sense was sown in me. A sense that he'd betrayed me. A sense that soon sprouted without my attendance.

'...Betray the Deiva... and one betrays the World itself... Disavowal was his deed, of aught and all... And so was he disavowed in turn...'

So said the same theologian. In his tone, his mien, trickled a gleam of triumph.

But such words I could neither challenge nor distrust. I was too busied. Too fraught for the mere effort. In those dire days, the tutors all told me thus in stark concert:

'...Even he found this easy enough...'

Reminders that I ought achieve all my brother once did. How crushed I was by the weight of it all. And yet to have whispered in my ears that such weight only ever half-bothered a "baser being" like my brother, that such difficulty was but a "deception", despite how desperately I strived...

...certainly.

Most certainly had Brother borne the weight of like days and still found freedom enough to ply the sword, to indulge in his love of literature... to spend time with Emilie and me.

...I wonder.

What sort of look had he on his face, again? On such days? On the daily, even? I tried to remember. But a grating noise, and all memory faded at once. Looking over my shoulder: yet another tutour, clearing his throat.

And so back to the book in hand my thoughts turned.

One of many forced upon me.



“Blessed” was befitting a brand for that land.

Blessed with sumptuous soils, flourishing flora, and many mountains and rivers to enrich its enviable reaches. The very portrait of a pastoral idyll. And soundly secure besides, far from the affrighting frontiers and unwounded by the wilder whims of mother nature.

Threading through its spans were myriad crossroads, as betwixt the bustling heart and bucolic hinterlands of Londosius it laid. Indeed, its position was prime, a treasure trove of exchange and opportunity. Such bounties begat also a sense of solace within its citizenry, for a more peaceable pall has it sustained thus far, even whilst walled-in by the war-like convictions of the Crown.

Many years of management, however, noted little from the present lord of this land. He was benignly banal, an average man of average ambition, his measured maintenance of this fief of his forebears being the sole star

to his legacy. But that was enough. None could gainsay that he was, at the very least, capable in carrying out what was expected of him.

So it was that such a land, presided by such a prince, held such hospitality which no visitor of eminence should find lacking.

This day was no different. Many persons of prestige were come, for today found this land host to a meeting on military munitions and the expected output thereof. Chief amongst them: the Dame Mareschal to the 1st Chivalric Order. A hailed hero of the realm, truly was she an eminence amongst eminences.

Upon conclusion of the meeting, the vaunted visitors were all ushered into the great hall for a resplendent reception. Sheeted tables were all about, each bedight with brilliant bouquets and platters filled with the finest foods of the land. Servants wove through the maze of standing guests, pouring wine and dispensing starters. But there was one press they could not penetrate, and that was the one surrounding the hero-dame herself.

What grace, what beauty the guests beheld in her as they all partook of pleasantries and mild merriment. But soon, this crowd parted left and right, for walking in now was the lord of the land himself.

“Your Mightiness the Lady Estelle,” he began. “A pleasure unparalleled to meet you on this fair day. As lord, I welcome you to my barony of Buckmann.”

“Ah, the Lord of Buckmann himself! And the fair Baroness besides,” Estelle greeted with a raised glass. The gesture was requited with a bow and curtsy from the Buckmanns, both of whom, too, balanced fine wine in their hands. “‘Tis an honour to meet you at last. I am Estelle of Tiselius, though I see my reputation precedes me.”

“Oh! *Precede!* Even the robins regale us with your feats, madame!” the baron laughed along with his wife. “Mayhap this be your first stay in our humble province?”

“‘Tis indeed, though hardly the first visit. Business has made me quite the busied tourist, if naught else,” the mareschal answered with gentle joviality.

Sure enough, it was by countless commutes to and from the royal capital that Estelle had grown rather familiar with the Buckmann landscape. Some visits to the nearby towns, too, were under her belt, that she fancied having strode past *him* unbeknownst at some point in time.

“And never does it fail to impress, this place,” she went on, peering briefly at the glow of blazing gloam beyond the windows. “All thanks to the fine rule of your house, I’m sure.”

With that, a spring-bright smile dawned upon her regard, rousing a wistful sigh from the cincture of guests. They had all of them heard word of Estelle’s winsome looks; none were disappointed in the slightest. One might even say they were captivated, for such comeliness, too, adorned her carriage and conduct both.

“*Oho!* Your words are as wings whisking me away to Heaven and back, Mightiness! Too kind you are,” the baron

beamingly gushed. “Indeed, this land is my life—as it should be! If His Majesty has measured me mete for this fief, then so must I answer with full concern to its care.”

Florid deference was in the baron’s diction, and for good reason. While true that Estelle was daughter to the count of Tiselius, she herself was hardly the head of a house—not so with the baron of Buckmann. The social ladder saw him situated upon a higher rung than she, thus by rights, there was no need to prostrate himself so before the mareschal, as it were.

But “mareschal” was the rub here. To be sure, Londosius, militarily minded as it was, illumed its Orderly commanders in a special light, one not to be outshone by any sitting lord. “Her Mightiness”, then, was not for show. Further still, the baron beheld before him no other mareschal than that of the 1st: the *hero-dame* herself.

Little wonder, now, as to why his mien was most courteous. His wife beside him seemed no different.

“Fair Mareschal, to all ladies of Londosius are you a shining lodestar, truly—not least to myself, of course,” the baroness said. “A great honour it is merely to make your acquaintance. Greater still now that my lord husband has your praises to boast about!”

“Let them be no less yours, my Lady,” Estelle returned softly. “But I must say, airing the truth was more my mind than charitable applause. Peace and plenty—this land is loved by much, and that is no lie.”

“My...!” blushed the baroness, covering her gasping grin.

“Truly a gladness upon our ears, Mightiness,” spoke her husband, bowing slightly. “’Tis but a fruit of unrelenting labour on the part of my wife and I, that the feats of my forefathers should not go fallow.”

Modesty, too, was in the baron’s mien. But deceit? Nay, for true to his word, the wonderful abundance of the Buckmann barony did owe much to the successes of his ancestors. The vibrant vegetation, for example, was the product of prudent irrigation works maintained by generations of Buckmanns. All the rivers, too, were rigorously regulated, thus were floods and like whims of the wild mitigated to a seldomness.

The current baron was but a cog in this enduring machine, a mere inheritor of his predecessors’ hard work. At the very least, however, he did not fall victim to the same vice committed by many other folk, ennobled or no: that of summing up his self-worth solely from the feats of his former lions and the prestige of his household. No, the baron was no such man. He merely saw his station as one of nurturing the fruits of his family, that they may be handed down unbruised to the next-in-line. And so was he never moved to endeavour any enterprise beyond his mould, nor to mar the amalgamated boons of the Buckmann line.

A man not so noteworthy—that was the baron. But he knew as much, and was sooner content than concerned with it. And for a wealsman such as he, it was a rare trait, indeed.

“Buckmannfolk be blessed,” Estelle reflected. “Surely could they not have wished for a finer lord.”

“Nay, my part be small,” the baron said, waving his hand humbly. “Their blessings are rather born from the

peace you and yours assay to protect, madame. Such rigours earn our greatest gratitude.”

Sunny was the baron’s smile. But not so for the mareschal, whose mien was then enshawled in shade.

“Peace... is it, now?” she echoed quietly.

A cloud then grew over the lord’s look.

Had he toed over some line? Perhaps so. For centuries has war smouldered under Londosius’ soles, but now did it burn more brightly than ever. “Peace”, then, ill-palled the realm and its people—not least those braving the fighting fields themselves. Theirs were shoulders bearing the burdens of battle most terrible of all. Where was peace *for them?*

The baron, keeper of his calm and curated garden, knew not. And yet did he gaily speak of it afore the mareschal, offering what but a *sunny* thanks for it. The absence of solemnity was thus a slight against the hero-dame, who herself had hitherto wagered her very life on the frontlines no few times before.

“I... I spoke awrong,” the baron said darkly. “Most dear be this peace, paid with sacrifices bitter beyond our knowing. Not lightly is it eked out; not lightly should it be lived. Yet light did I make of it. A sin upon my head, Mightiness. Pray forgive me.”

“Why such words, Lord Buckmann?” the mareschal asked the brooding baron, her regard unreadable. “Peace is peace, is it not? Free and deserved by all?”

“‘Tis indeed, madame. Peace be the due of all Londosian folk, certainly. But wealsman that I am, my station demands

more... nuance. And there did I fail to answer. The stain of ignorance is mine to wash.”

With bitterness were bent the baron’s brows, his gaze grave as it cast down. Bared in his words was his heart of hearts. The baroness, too, appeared no less pressed by her husband’s faux pas.

Seeing them so morose, Estelle inly sighed. They were unsullied, these two, set with jewels of just and genial sentiment. Meeting them here on this mild evening informed the mareschal as much. But more lurked behind this “much”. For on those heart-jewels glimmered cracks and ill-formed facets of foolery: dullards, Estelle deemed them. The “why” of it was simple.

These two had once abandoned a child.

Nay, they had disavowed that child’s very *existence*.

If such became not the deed of dullards, then what did? Bearing this thought, Estelle parted her lips once more. Here on this day, in this hall, would be aired the words she had longed to give breath to.

“Splendid,” she began, handing off her wine glass to a servant. “You well-hem in the howls of your heart, my Baron—a lodestar in your own right, hm? How blessed your *children* be, to have such a light to look to.”

A wisp of anger gave volume to her voice. But to her, it was not to be helped, for the Buckmanns were fair folk, more so than her prior measure of them. And that was precisely why it pricked at the hero-dame’s patience so.

If fair they be, then *why*?

This, Estelle could not help but wonder.

Why commit so cruel a mistake?

Why abandon a child so?

Oh, how it racked her.

But for however much it did, the Buckmanns discerned it not. Nevertheless, their faces were stiff. For years now, it was taboo to touch the very topic of “children” in their presence. The other guests seemed to understand this quite well as they watched on in cold sweat.

After a moment of numb confoundment, the Buckmanns at last broke their silence.

“...Blessed, indeed, for our part, as well,” the baron almost stammered, unsteadily nodding. “Dear Felicia took well to the burdens of her upbringing. She is our pride and joy.”

“That she is!” his wife echoed. “And a Dame Brigadier to the Order, no less!”

“Oh, I know. Very well, in fact,” said Estelle. “To mine ears stream word of the strong, whether they hail from the 1st... or the 5th.”

To this, the Buckmanns exhaled with relief. Their stiff faces softened to those of parents, sparkling with pride and consideration for their child. Such warmth only worsened Estelle’s irritation.

Loving and lauding their dear daughter, Felicia Buckmann, was not in itself a crime, no. It was well and fine,

in fact. But was that it? Had they nothing at all for another of their rearing?

The thought rose and rushed to Estelle's lips.

"...You are blessed with a *son*, as well, are you not?" she asked with sharpness, straightway cutting open whatever comfort that might have eased the Buckmanns' faces. Petrified once more, their brows furrowed further than before. All pleasantries turned to pain.

"...Your Mightiness," the baron began again, tense in his timbre. "Verily you seem apprised of the man himself. You, the very pinnacle of the knightly Orders, suffering the stain of... of so vain and vapid an officer. What indignance you thus bear, I can scarce imagine. For my part, I am shawled in shame to have ushered in such a shadow upon this world. But, pray, do know this: that *thing* is no longer a son of mine."

"It is as my lord husband says, Your Mightiness," the baroness added. "That *thing* is but a worm of an otherworld, slithering through our lands—a fiend fancying itself a son of Man. Its presence pains us greatly, but silence should serve a greater salve. Pray let this rest, madame."

Oh, the heat howling now in the hero-dame's veins! Any more and her blood might truly have boiled over.

Yet this was no habit of hers. Portrait of prestige that she was, not few of her days were spent spewing platitudes with the many other who's whos of high society. But if there was aught such unsought days have honed in her, it was the art of the palliative, of masking herself in mildness to unmake any arisen friction.

Would that the hard-learned lessons availed her here, for brimming from her face now was anger most apparent to any eye. The wrath of Londosius' most renowned blade, laid all too bare. Such rancour then coldened to a keenness for killing, coursing from every span of her body.

The Buckmanns yelped. There they stood, frozen as frogs afore a seething, glaring serpent. The other guests, all of them, recoiled in fright.

"Dr-dread Mareschal!" the baron whimpered. "Most just be your rage, most just, indeed! But pray perish all mind for that man. He is a wayside stone, a sallowd soul, a soiling eye-sore! Yet nary an obstacle should he prove to the mighty momentum of you and yours!"

"Th-that he is, and naught more!" his wife yipped. "And should he be a babe too blaring in his blubbering, why, do cast him off, madame. To some dungeon corner, dark and alone. He'll rot soon enough, I reckon!"

At that very moment did a scabbard hang from the hero-dame's hip. And sheathed in it: a live sword. A fact of much regret to the mareschal, as to stay her sword-hand from reaching the hilt required a mountain of restraint.

Oh, for one's own child, what wicked words. Allowed by divine law though they were, Estelle yet found herself incapable of concealing her ire.

"...And I reckon not."

Those few words, finally wrung out of her, were aimed exactly at the baroness' desired doom for her son. But the Buckmanns' discernment of this was clear off the mark: they instead took them as an echoing repudiation of the ungraced himself, that for sure did the mareschal

vehemently share in their disgust for the child they themselves begat and reared.

What hope they had for this day. Hope in meeting the mareschal, hope in forming a lasting fellowship with so famed and fair a personage. For to be friends with Londosius' foremost lioness would surely shine a new light upon the future of House Buckmann. But in their reverie had they roused the lioness to her present rage.

It was all that man's fault. The man they once raised as a son of their own. Even now, of all times, was he managing to mangle things up! This was the Buckmanns' thought, boiling in their bosoms by the heat of regret.

"Y... Your Mightiness," the baron began again, "we share in your chagrin, we do. For in fairer days did we once harbour hope for him. But those days are dusked. He has turned a man ungraced, a hound unfanged—"

"I reckon not, I said!"

So repeated Estelle, her tone a tempered edge, her indignance a damning ring through the hushed hall.



The son of House Buckmann: a castaway cadet... and a soul spurned of holy communion with the Deiva. Such was his lot, and Estelle dared no argument against it. But for the baron to brand his abandoned son a "hound unfanged", feeble and haggard—in that, Estelle found fault.

This “hound”, as they called him, had fangs enough. A wolf of valour, winter-worn and well-fought, with a will of steel forged in fires of resolve. Of this, Estelle’s eyes have seen, her ears have heard, her heart has felt.

To think, that this son’s merits were fast forgotten by his own begetters—nay, were as yet *unknown* to them, served only to stoke further the hero-dame’s displeasure. Though the wine she had been sipping, too, might have had a hand in fanning her flames.

“Lord and Lady both. Your lips seem loath to whisper even the name of your son. Allow *me*, then, if you will,” Estelle continued, her anger eloquent and unabated. “Your son, this ‘*Rolf Buckmann*’...”

There, clarion in the mareschal’s own voice: the gallant ungraced’s very name, and to Buckmann air, an anathema.

“...is most *remarkable*. A man of unmatched regard!”

Gaping open now was the baron’s mouth. “*Howha...!?*”

The mareschal’s was too puzzling a proclamation to him. The lamb unloved by Yoná, Most Divine; the apostate ill-suffered in the spans of this land—common sense makes clear that such a man deserves damnation wheresoever he wanders. And yet, here hurrying into the baron’s ears were Estelle’s stellar *praises* for the vauntless vagrant.

“Y-Your Mightiness?” the baron said breathlessly. “I-I fear I miss your meaning...”

Estelle stared with steel at the Buckmanns. “I meant exactly as you’ve heard: your son is a *magnificent* man. More so than you—than *all* of you.”

A remark to mar the mirth of any social function.

Not even the mareschal's prestige could escape unscathed in vouching for the unvouchable like she did. Indeed, though she be the hero-dame of Londosius, unrivalled and unreachable, to veer so clearly away from creed and collective thought was sure to lay barbs and briars upon her path.

But it was a remark too long in the making. To leave it unaided sat most ill with Estelle.

His beaten and bloodied figure, fighting on and on for all he believed in.

His stout and unsung stature, unrelenting even aface uncountable scorn and contempt.

There was no shame in aught he shouldered. Yet shame was all his bloodkin knew of him. Shame was all they could speak of him. Shame was his one and only name to them. But well-knowing the truth of him and his trials, and hearing them challenged unjustly by his own parents, Estelle was taken very nearly to tears.

But no more. Hers would be the words that severed this silence.

"M... magnif... ficent?" the baron muttered. "That man, you say? More than I? Than us *all*?"

"M-Madame," said the baroness, small and muted. "Might have you mistaken him for another, perchance?"

"Nay. Mine is no mistake," Estelle answered. "Rolf Buckmann—a martial-devout! A mind of whetted wisdom! A man of golden gallantry! And you? What are yours but

crumbs of an accomplishment, scattered in the shadow of *his* mountain of merits?”

“W... wh...”

Words were all but lost to the lord and lady. To be “below” an ungraced—an insult of unequalled slander! But that earned not the brunt of their disbelief; rather, it was in Estelle’s very speech. The hero-dame of Londosius, most renowned in all the realm, maundering on matters most mysterious to their ears. Was this some jest? A joust of words for dubious merriment? The Buckmanns could not know. The mareschal’s very *demeanour*, they could not comprehend.

And so their confusion remained neither mended upon their mien, nor paid any mind from the hero-dame.

“Long should I’ve been buried, if not for Rolf. I, along with a great many other knights and dames,” she confessed. “Hark, my good Baron. This very moment ought find you sobbing... upon the headstone of your pride! Your joy! Your dear daughter *Felicia*! Were Rolf any less of a man! For she, too, owes her living breath to her brother!”

“No...!” the baron grimaced. “Madness...!”

“Madness, indeed! That you scorn the truth!” Estelle countered. “Yet think you madness be my mien? Think you, Baron, these lips be given to lies?”

Lies? Not so. Felicia’s life was living proof. A twice-attested token of Rolf’s heroism, for not only at the Battle of Erbelde was she delivered by him, but in the grim mirk of Mt. Godrika, as well. And of the two feats, neither had escaped the mareschal’s ken.

“Nay, I... I... b-but... *mmngh!*” groaned the lord.

The Buckmanns were pale by this point. They could fathom none of the confusion afore them. Bludgeoned by balderdash, harried by this hogwash of a humiliation—*them!* The very lord and lady of this manor, this land!

Then, as though impelled by what pride he had in his position, the baron managed to open his mouth again.

“Y... yet he was damned by our Deiva, all the same. And *that* is the truth. Unchanging, unchallenged!” he cried. “If aught could be gleaned from so unglorified a truth, let it be this: that man, that *thing* is a *fremd*, foul and foreign!”

Ah, yes. Of course. The creed of Yonaism, ever the card-up-the-sleeve for any soul so cornered. Always reliable, never refutable, for exactly as the baron had broached, it was the common and unquestionable thought of all folk in this realm. And like a desperate dealer did he dangle his winning card, to which Estelle simply sighed.

“...Pardon,” she said softly, letting her shoulders settle. “This passion of mine—’twas a fire overfed.”

Incredible. Never had the mareschal lost her cool in the cacophonies of uncountable battlefields. But to have lost it *here* of all places?

Estelle inly chided herself for the irony. Though to be sure, she regretted naught she had aired thus far.

“Lord Buckmann,” she began again, newly calmed. “Oft in this noble sphere that we share is familial love left a forlorn second to the future of the house. Doling out disinheritance be your right as lord of your line, certainly; that, too, I concede.”

Still, hers was no heart that could so condone the repudiation of one's child and its very existence. But that was a thought Estelle was unfain to unfurl, not after having just collected her cool. Her mind, then, was to unmince the matter for the baron, that he might fully know the faults of his ways.

"But do heed this, Baron, and heed it well," the mareschal went on. "Ever are we chained to the choices of our making. Thus should one day you find fangs bared your way by the very 'hound' you chose to abandon—and likewise behold him grown to a grandness far beyond your most fearsome fancies—say *never* that you had no other choice."

"What is this...!?" the baron hissed, his veins vaulting asudden. "That thing? A hound soon to harry *my way*? *My house*? *My line*!? Is that your reckoning of him!? Of this ill affair!?"

"Perhaps," Estelle answered, clear and quiet. "Or perhaps... not. Perhaps to him, *you* are the wayside stone."

"...*Waysi*...!?"

The lord, worth not even a whim of attention? From the very hound he had cast from his house? A statement most unsought. His humiliation deepening by the moment, the baron at last began to bristle and quake—a sight savouring not a crumb of care from the mareschal as she turned her back to the Buckmanns.

"Most warm was your welcome," she said, before starting her way out of the great hall, watched by every eye in attendance. "Thank you and good day, Lord and Lady."

“Hold there...!” the baron barked, grinding his teeth, with his wife fuming beside him all the while. “Why? Why do you vouch for that vermin so!? Do you not think yourself imperilled by your present port? A port more beseeming a traitor than a strength of Londosius!?”

Estelle stopped. “Nay, Baron. For strength *is* my very charge. Its seeking, its scrying in other souls—I judge strength, that Londosius might live another day.”

The lord pointed at her. “Foolery fogs your eyes! If ‘strong’ be your measure of him!”

Hoarse was his howling by now, to which Estelle turned with a sidelong look upon the lord and his lady.

“*I* am strong,” she proclaimed, “more so than any other huddled in this hall.” A truth incontestable. And none present dared the deed. Next did The Strong slowly cast her stare from guest to guest, before partaking in another proclamation. “Such is why I know well of strength. And thus, of whom are strong and what worth they hide within.”

Collective silence answered her. In it, the Buckmanns remained ill-convinced. Indeed, Estelle’s words found only deeper disagreement from them.

“Unthinkable...” the lord’s wife uttered, barely above a whisper. “...Most unthinkable. That so unsightly a stain as he can—”

“‘*Unsightly*’?” Estelle cut in. “What of your son be unsightly, Lady Buckmann? Is it not *sightly* as the summer sun that so unlike his parents, he is a beauty most evident to all eyes beholding? ‘Tis so to mine, I say—indeed, his features grip me *fast in fascination*.”

A gasp from the baroness. "*Fasci...!?*"

"Yes, *fascinating*, those eyes of his, wouldn't you say?" the mareschal smirked. "Calm as clouds, yet fierce like fires alive—oh! Nary a night do I bed unvisited by visions of his gaze."

And his burly body besides, a masterwork of muscle. A body Estelle saw, knew, felt for herself in the waning throes of the Battle of Erbelde, where in his lumber-like arms was she embraced and bulwarked against an explosion. The memory was faded not in the faintest. Recalling it, the mareschal turned away once more. But as she did...

"Why, I ought offer him this very hand," she added. "The hand of a hero-bride."



With those whirlwind words and one last look, Estelle sauntered off.

“Wha...!” In her wake: the befuddled Buckmanns and their guests, all aghast, each and every one. Ringing through the air was naught but the footfalls of the mareschal’s silver heels.

†

Wheeling away from the Buckmann manor now was a grand and guarded carriage. Within it was sat Francis Behrmann, Under-Mareschal to the 1st, who, with half-opened eyes as saintly as they were silent, looked on at his superior afore him. There she was, Estelle Tiselius, sword-maiden of Londosius—

—hunched with both hands over her face.

“Ughh...” she groaned, quite fain to faint at any moment, as her heart reeled with regret for her conduct just moments ago.

She had said all she needed to say and found no fault in that, for the most part. Whipping the Buckmanns, too, till they were seething at the seams did not bother her in the slightest. But as the curtains were closing was she taken by the moment—*too* taken, really, and curiously so, enough to have teased out of her word after word most unexpected

and most unnecessary. The memory was faded not in the *faintest*. Recalling it, the mareschal moaned in misery.

“Mmnn...”

“‘Twas a maidenly line, mademoiselle,” came Francis’ remark, a merciless salt-massage upon the mareschal’s wound. He himself was in attendance, and with unoccluded eyes and ears both had witnessed the episode in full. “‘Calm as *clouds*,” he flatly recited, “yet *fierce* like *fires alive*. *Oh*. Nary a night do I *bed unvisited* by visions of *his gaze*.’”

“Hmnngh...!”

“‘I ought *offer him* this *very hand*: the hand of a *hero-bride*.’”

“Nnwaaah!”

‘I am strong,’ this hero-dame had declared. Yet here the contrary cut more clearly, to which Francis all but sighed and shook his head. And then, a thought happened.

His mademoiselle’s warning to the baron—that Rolf Buckmann could one day brandish the blade of betrayal... with his father being but one of many marks. Such was Estelle’s seeming meaning, Francis surmised. Oh, but it was only a hunch, one could say.

Yet it was one from Estelle Tiselius, and hers was never a hunch to go unheeded.

For some time, then, had the mareschal been foreseeing such a future, one now daring to flower.

“Ever fickle, the fates...” Francis murmured, turning his eyes to the window, where winding by was the dusking

beauty of the Buckmann barony. But yonder, far, far yonder
in the western fringe, there blazed frays and fires yet
unscried by both him and his mademoiselle.



Ten were gathered in the stateroom at the Margrave Ström's mansion. Astride the long meeting table they sat, with the lord himself at the head.

On one side was seated the visiting envoy of the Zaharte Battalion, comprising its most central members. Nearest to the margrave were Viola and Theodor Östberg. Elder sister and younger brother they were, and as well, the free company's respective captain and vice-captain. Ulrik and Sigmund were the other two, brutish men who both chafed about in their chairs. Four figures total, all looking in the second decade of their lives. But for however young they were, theirs was a mettle of mighty measure, pillars upon which was held the housetop of Zaharte's name.

Across from them sat the other five guests: the Fiefguard commanders and—furthest from the margrave—Felicia herself.

"...Such be our present plight," so concluded a commander's briefing. He then leant forth, clasping his hands together. "Any questions, Captain?"

Meeting his gaze was Viola Östberg, upright of posture and crowned with tufts of rich russet hair trimmed to a short, boyish length. Fair was her face, but bejewelled with sagacious eyes most beseeming a leader of so esteemed a band of mercenaries.

“Withal I sense much cause for concern in this ‘acting commandant’. His treachery intrigues,” spoke Viola with flowing eloquence, who then turned slightly to her side. “What think you, Theodor?”

“Why, very much the same, good Sister,” assented the vice-captain. Like his elder sibling, Theodor’s tresses were of an earthen hue, but longer by a degree. Tall was his stature, straight and somewhat slender, whilst his own face seemed gentle as it breathed a benign air. “What’s his name again? Rolf? Rolf Buckmann, is it?” he wondered aloud.

“It is,” answered a Fiefguard leader. “He’s fallen in with the Nafílim, if our reports ring true enough.”

“And by our eyes, a figure alike to his was found fighting in the prior battle,” the margrave added, before looking to Felicia. “Brigadier, if you will.”

For a little while, she sat paused. “...’Twas when the fore of the Fiefguard’s file had nigh-gained the gates of Balasthea,” Felicia began hesitantly. “There I gleaned a far figure sallying forth to engage the vanguard... with a mien seeming to match Rolf Buckmann’s.”

“And how certain was your sight?” Viola asked her.

“Certain enough, Captain,” the margrave answered in Felicia’s place, “for she is none other than Buckmann’s own blood-sister.”

“*Sister?*” Viola almost gasped. “Dear me...”

For a moment, mercy mingled in with the sharpness of the Zaharte captain’s gaze. Unbreakable was the bond and trust she shared with her own brother, thus it astounded

Viola to behold a like bond, but of an unlike strength: lesser, and languishing in languor.

Felicia fidgeted with unease. “N-nay, that man—that *figure*: it looked to me to have felled many a Fiefguardsman... single-handedly.”

Her words elicited widened eyes from the Fiefguard commanders, who then turned glances to one another.

That her brother counted amongst the Nafílim blades so bared against Arbel was a bitter reality to Felicia, one she dearly disbelieved. And so did she cling to clouded uncertainty, wishing for that fighting “figure” to remain naught but an anonymous anomaly. For though that battlefield had been a far and chaotic canvas, shuddering with no surety, Felicia’s eyes saw one fact true enough: that figure, with sword in hand, was *hewing* through Fiefguard flesh.

Such ferocity could not possibly be found in so frail a man as Rolf Buckmann.

“Oi, quit beatin’ ‘round the bush, yea? Ain’t got time for puzzles an’ prattle!” barked Sigmund: Zaharte hatchet-man and a boorish blade of a youth. Yawning next to him was Ulrik, legs crossed and eyes long loitering elsewhere.

“Tame your tongue before His Excellency, you...!” came another bark from across the table.

“Let it alone,” the margrave soothed his incensed commander. “These *sellswords* sit as honoured guests.”

Sure enough, nestled in his princely diction and demeanour was disdain for these freelances and their foul lot, a fact not unfound to the Östbergs. The Zaharte

Battalion boasted regard high enough to count nobles amongst their frequent clientèle, and being ever the duo to deal with such silver-spooned patrons, Viola and Theodor had, by now, grown keen to their muted, malignant mannerisms. Subtleties the two were careful never to take open offence to; this, too, was a lesson learnt from many a year of selling their swords.

“Your good will gladdens, Excellency,” Viola bowed slightly.

“Ours be a line of business more begging skill than civility,” Theodor chimed in. “So we are as we are: a band of brutes, not least these two fine fellows of ours. But bid us battle and boons be upon you, good Lord.”

Following their superiors’ words, Ulrik curled his lips up in a smirk, whilst Sigmund sang in scornful laughter. Felicia could but knit her brows at such a scene. In the Östbergs was refinement enough, but for the two grisly grunts, not one dam could stay her displeasure.

No matter. The margrave had made the point himself. Sellswords are truly an off-shot strain of Men; there is no helping such hawkish souls.

“...Then I’ll not mince words,” Felicia began again, having quelled her discontent. “My brother, Rolf Buckmann—he has not in him an iota of ody. Even with sword in hand, he is of small succour in battle. The figure I saw, then, cannot be him.”

“Not an iota, you say?” Viola asked, cocking her head in confusion. Answers were offered by the Fiefguard commanders.

“Not one. This Rolf Buckmann was given no grace of odyl from our Deiva. Hence is he unfit for the fray.”

“Only a portion of our personnel is bedecked with silver, for certain. Still, a slight against reason it is to think an ungraced should gain aught against any of our men, let alone cut them down.”

A snicker then scratched at the stifled air.

“No odyl doled t’this dastard, is it!?” Ulrik echoed, before blasting laughter out from his throat. “I right guff’d t’that, I did! Hahah!”

Amidst the noise, the Östberg siblings looked to each other, wheeling their many cogs of careful thought. At length, Theodor turned to the rest and proposed the next step.

“The fled soldiers of the fort nevertheless attest to the acting commandant’s turncoating, no? That best serves a base lode to all our plans here on, I say.”

“My brother speaks aright,” Viola followed. “Nevermind the ungracedness of this ‘Rolf Buckmann’, nor his apparent presence in the prior battle. What now presses us most is amidst the Nafílim, there breathes a traitor with troves of knowledge—as to the lay of this fief-burgh and its Fiefguard defenders. We ought train all caution to this account.”

The Zaharte captain’s point was as precise as it was painful, not least to the Fiefguard commanders, who all sat still and sombre.

Hitherto were the Nafílim empty of intelligence on Arbel. But with Rolf in their ranks, such no longer held true, for sure enough, after having assumed charge of Balasthea did

he hunger for information pertaining to the plight of this march of Ström. And oh, what a feast he fed upon.

The layout of Arbel was but an appetiser; the main course was the particulars on the Fiefguard itself. Its make-up, its manoeuvres, its tactics, its tendencies—tastes all savoured and likely remembered to a tittle.

The silence hung for a moment more before its breaking by the youngest amongst the Fiefguard leaders.

“What of parley? Of discourse?” he timidly broached. “Might speech sooner avail us than spears...?”

“*Parley?*” cried a senior commander. “With that *ungraced!?*”

“*Your* speech be madness, you mite-wit!” remonstrated another.

Such was the speed of their displeasure that the young leader shrank back. Still, he went on.

“...Yet surely our shoulders were loved by levity only *after* this man took to the post. And now that it is vacant—now that Rolf Buckmann sets his gaze against us—are we burdened more than ever... that we might buckle to our ruin. Challenge him, and we well-chisel our own headstones, do we not?”

To words weakly spoken and wrung with much strength of shame, the fellow Fiefguard commanders could do naught but bend their brows bitterly in silence. Pained expressions, as though the truth were stabbing them with sore certainty.

Further on did the young commander murmur ruesomely. “Best we offer him the regular commandant’s

seat... and promise him his peace. Recommend to him an easy return to our ranks, why don't we?"

"Recommend" rather than "request"—this seemed the limit of his shame. But his choice of words only echoed how cornered the commanders all felt, as on and on they sustained their silence. Acknowledging their plight and peril was the only path forward, but it was pride that jealously stayed their first step.

Till today were they sat comfortably upon Rolf's shoulders, mocking and mealing him even as he toiled to turn Balasthea's fortunes around. Yet certainly enough, it was the great height of his achievements that afforded them a safe perch for the very act. Indeed, though the commanders did not scorn the battlefield, they well-scorned the man that availed them much advantage upon its fiery spans.

But from today onward was he their foe, much to their aching woe. The pain was an epiphany: that the man they so disdained was now dealing them the very cards upon which their lives were wagered. And his was no deck of mercy.

"But will this 'Rolf Buckmann' see the appeal of the parley?" Viola enquired the quieted commanders.

Beyond all doubt did Rolf Buckmann seem a man loathing a loving return to the realm of his breeding—not after baring this many blades against its sons. A parley, too, would prove a poor purse for buying time. Such was Viola's thought.

"For my part, I see none, to begin with," the margrave answered bluntly.

“If I may!” Felicia raised her voice. “Allow *me* to sway him! Or at least—”

“Brigadier!” growled the margrave. “Do not take my words for some hollow wind.”

Another proposal butchered with all speed. It was a forgone conclusion to the margrave, absent even his private misgivings for the ungraced man: Rolf was *not* to be negotiated with. The sin of high treason hung heavy on that head of his; to extend to him the expiating hand would sully the holy lustre of Londosius. And with clemency certainly not in Central’s interests, parleying, then, was a path shut tight.

Felicia’s gaze fell. “...As you will, Excellency.”

“Let us touch upon tactics, shall we?” Viola broached anew. Battle was her main concern, one she wished to quickly confirm the particulars of. “I propose our company reinforce the Fiefguard’s frailest ranks, whilst a select few of our finest shall sally forth and strike when and where at need. Might this please Your Excellency’s ears?”

“It does,” the margrave nodded. “But intelligence must be shared between our forces—unbrokenly, and to all detail. This, I demand.”

“But of course,” bowed Viola. “Much gratitude for your heedance, Excellency.”

Arbel was blessed with many a grand gate along its walls; which of them the Nafílim horde would assault was a worry to the margrave. And so long as he and all the others knew not the answer, a force speedy in the response was most appreciated.

Truth be told, the margrave was very much warm to the idea of reining in the Zaharte grunts under his Fiefguard's command, though little abated was his coldness for having to play along with the sellswords' tactics. Still, Arbel and more were on the line, and clear even to his eyes was the superior worth of Viola's plan.

A rush of air.

And following it, a chair groaning against the granite floor.

Eyes turned, finding Felicia asudden on her feet.

"Your Excellency," she said sternly, "pray allow me to join the battle."

"...I've allowed you once," the margrave began answering, "but twice I'll not brook, for your position be *perilous*, Brigadier."

"My Lord, I beg of you!"

The spark of desperation was in her ruby regard. And deeper in it, a sisterly concern that was not so... *simple*. Not to the margrave, no. For his own eyes saw in her a sibling bond nigh-bordering on obsession.

An aberration she was, then. The thought grew on the lord as he looked upon Felicia. Indeed, an aberration of untold trouble, uncertain and ill-leashed in. That she shared blood with this new foe was reason enough to restrain her from the battlefield. But now he did he see more reason to restrict this wild card from all further involvement.

"Mind your meddling, Felicia *Buckmann!*" the margrave shouted. "The course of this king-given fief hinges on the

fortunes of this battle! 'Tis not some venue for your family feud!"

Felicia winced, hushed by the lordly anger.

Near might be her brother.

Near, and bearing the Nafílim banner, though she wished it not.

But if so, then she must meet him. Only, she could not.

Amidst the friction of many feelings, Felicia stood with fists white and stiff.



Lise looked all along the portcullis gate. Even with sixty passūs and more spanning between them, its scale left her no less daunted. Against the mirk of midnight, too, was it shrunk little, for torches were set about its base, revealing it as a maw muffled by a grille of metal and hemmed in by an armour-like arch of stone.

It was but one of Arbel's many gates, and soon to be beset by the braves of Hensen.

Many of Londosius' marches and provinces operate in a manner not unlike city-states. In one would stand a capital—the fief-burgh, seat of the lord and heart of his rule—whilst scattered about the countryside would be satellite towns and villages, each eking out their due in agriculture and other like trades. This march of Ström was no different. Thus

to bring Arbel to its knees and smite the margrave would surely precipitate the fall of the fiefdom itself.

Long-burning was the battle waged upon this land. Only now could its quenching be glimpsed. And the sole standard to see the next sunrise: the Nafílim flag. So thought Lise as looming in her heart was a great anxiety.

The very gate in her gaze would be hers to attack, but not on her own, of course. Marching with her was her own contingent of braves. At another gate, too, was amassed a separate force, one led by Rolf. The rest were in the reins of Volker, himself helming the entire operation as high commander.

Of the many mouths of Arbel, four would be struck, and simultaneously, at that. Such was Rolf's scheme, but the inspiration was owed to the Nafílim themselves, for on many a past occasion had they employed like stratagems against Balasthea. The swordsman of soot found it quite the fair manoeuvre, enough to reenact it here at so pivotal a battle. Its effectiveness was attested against Rolf himself in his time as Balasthea's commandant. To have it surface again was his way of admitting such, and rather openly, earning wry smiles from the Nafílim privy to the irony.

Still, more was at stake here, thus were changes in order. Two, three concurrent targets was the norm for the Nafílim, but not so for this night. Four was their chosen number; worrisome, yes, that their host should be so divided, but much deliberation saw more handsomeness in the reward than hazard in the risk.

Arbel's interior roads were many, but those connecting the four targets were not laid with efficiency in mind, as from one to another needed quite the trek. Should word and

alarum be sent from the foresaid gates, the Fiefguard would find much friction: messages would travel slowly, orders received belatedly, and reinforcements mustered and moved with great difficulty.

The contrary was the crowning advantage for the Nafílim host. Outside the gates was even and mild terrain, four fine theatres for easy, offensive coordination. Hence only the defending Fiefguard would be whipped into chaos in the combat to come. Already were the Men's numbers culled to their dire disadvantage; now they further stood to be stretched and strained like a fraying string.

No Nafílim mind on that night could have devised such a plan. The lay of the land, of the fief-burgh—critical as they were, only Rolf had knowledge enough of them.

Lise began to recall what she had heard.

'True; ours is a superior number. Attacking straight as we are should pierce the city with pain enough. But much merit do I find in Rolf's strategy.'

Volker's evaluation of the scheme, given to the jarl-daughter after Rolf had headed off to his target gate. The war-chief could well-challenge the ill-wisdom in spreading one's forces so thinly, but for Rolf's designs, he saw little reason to.

'Through all crannies and corners does he seek key advantages, but never does he full-trust to any one. Wolven, indeed, his wisdom. Strange, yet intriguing. His schemes here and at Balasthea prove it clear.'

Lise agreed with the war-chief's every word. Though if given the choice, intrigue, to her, was most immediately found in Rolf's swordsmanship. Those swings, those lunges,

those thrusts of his that she had beheld at Hensen and yestermorrow's battle—all were bladestrokes most beautiful to her eyes. And it was no fluke, either, for even at the Battle of Erbelde three winters past was she no less a bewildered witness to his sheer skill.

A hero of legend, brandishing his blade and felling his foes—such well-beseemed Rolf's fighting form. Merely remembering it brought a fiery flush to Lise's cheeks.

“...hh!” she gasped.

A flapping fluttered through the air as Lise vigorously shook her head to and fro, catching herself dipped in daydreams unfit for the battlefield. The sight baffled her nearby braves.

Right. No time for daydreams. Berta was watching. The battle at hand demanded all attention.

Switching gears, Lise peered piercingly at the gate. Then, with a voice vaulting clear through the night, she cried out her command.

“To the city! Attack, attack!!”

†

“Four?” Theodor thought aloud as he minded the map upon the table. “Daredevils, much?”

Arbel—the Zaharte Battalion had already settled into this fief-burgh, and erected in one of its squares a command

centre of their own. A breeze was blowing, but it did little to lighten the air: as per the sentries, four of the fief-burgh's gates were being attacked—all at once.

It was but the night following the Fiefguard's defeat afore the battlements of Balasthea. A single day, then, was all the Nafílim horde had needed to reignite their momentum. Hardly strange; their number suffered few losses, after all. Arbel's strategists therefore had concluded that in short order would their gates be gained; Central's reinforcements were days away yet, and the Nafílim knew well enough to strike the city at its feeblest hour.

A prediction proven by this moment. Still, the devils struck sooner than the defenders would have liked. Such speed well-presented the horde's organisational agility, and as well, that their victory at Hensen was no mere whim of the fates.

But there was a queerness to this new commotion: that very horde was now harrying Arbel with forces split in *four*. A strategy straining reason. Why spread so thinly against defenders this desperate? Theodor asked himself this same question, finding it likely a strategic blunder or some brazen insult. All along the map he looked as he kept pondering this fortuitous folly, till...

"Mm?" he muttered, eyes newly wide. Comfort turned to caution. "You see what I see, Sis?"

Viola followed her brother's gaze. "North-One and Four... and to the right, East-Two and Four... Not physically are these gates so distant. But the roads betwixt seem awfully... *scenic*. This bodes ill for us."

"Ill, for sure," Theodor echoed. True enough, the arterial streets connecting the targeted gates wound widely about

the fief-burgh's blocks Thus was it no fool offence as Theodor had hoped: the gates were chosen specifically to give the defenders as tough a time coordinating as possible. "The reports rang true, then. If they've scried this far..."

...then amongst the Nafílim was someone with much intelligence on the city. And the most immediate candidate?

Rolf Buckmann.

Tell of his turncoating feigned no lie all along.

Viola nodded in agreement. "Tell me. What's *his* worth in your eyes?"

With Theodor's insight did the Zaharte captain hope to piece together an actionable answer to this development. Her brother's was a boon of a brain; ever in times like this did Viola trust to his mind first and foremost.

"Worth? Well, let's see... He's ungraced, for starters. A proper sting in the pious arse, certainly; mine included. And a treacher besides, through and through," he opined gravely, holding his chin in thought. "Whichever our lot, ever are we all lambs loved by Yoná. But a black sheep damned by the Deiva Herself? A rightwise retribution, I say: if it bleats to an alien tune, then it is a beast *disbelonging* on Her earth—and naught more."

"Words, right from my lips," Viola agreed. Two lambs, confirming details undoubtable by any from Her herd.

"But as for worth..." Theodor went on, "...my eyes see the *wolf* under the black wool. Think on it: Balasthea, delivered in mere *months*. This Rolf had a plan and the means to execute it. As he does against us now, I'm sure."

Oft was the vice-captain taken for a softie of a soldier, and not without reason: meek was his image and elegant was his gait. His foes, too, were fast in mocking his mild mien. But they were all of them silenced, and Theodor had their many heads to prove it. Hence was he keen never to echo their mistake, as Death was wont to wear robes gentlest to the eye.

Such sombre thoughts served a foundation for his next words.

“Suppose a man, a prolific contributor to the annals of scholastic achievement. But meet him, and you find him infirm, his every limb long lost to leprosy. Yet must that diminish his regard?” Theodor expounded, pacing off to the side. “Suppose another man: a lifelong imbecile. But behold in a cathedral’s niches many standing statues, marvellous in all their marbled mastery. And graven upon their pedestals? His signature, chiselled and proud. How much of an imbecile is he, then?” Turning heel, the vice-captain looked to his sister. “Suppose the same with this Rolf. Look ill beyond his ungraced label, and we look only into the dark of our graves, I say.”

“Fair enough,” Viola concurred, folding her arms in thought. “Then suppose he dons the grand strategist’s garb. Where might he be amongst these four points?”

Theodor shrugged and shook his head. “My ken can’t scry that far, I’m afraid. How fares yours, Sis?”

“It fares with this finger,” the sister answered, sliding her digit across the map before stopping at the northern edge of Arbel. Circled in ink: the gates North-One and North-Four.

“Why’s that?” asked Theodor.

“I’ve heard tell he much hates hostilities meted upon Nafílim civilians. The same be true with plundering; wish it upon Nafílim or no, and you earn his swift rebuke. Balasthea’s former bulwark-men attest to this,” Viola explained. “A puzzle of a pate, he has. But humour his game and we can guess his play.”

“That being mercy upon Arbel’s meek, I take it?” guessed Theodor. “If that’s your thought, then certainly the north seems the front of focus. There is it farther away from the residential district than the east.”

“Exactly so,” said Viola. The siblings then nodded together.

“The Fiefguardsmen defend North-One most dearly,” the brother confirmed. “We ought do our part and shore up North-Four with forces of our own.”

In answer, Viola wasted no time. “New orders!” she cried. “Dispatch Ulrik and Sigmund to North-Four at once!”

Saluting, a soldier anear speedily left the scene with her message. The command centre buzzed anew with activity.

“Ulrik *and* Sigmund?” Theodor asked his sister amidst the bustle.

“You heard aright.”

The vice-captain’s visage broke with surprise. A natural response; after all, Ulrik’s and Sigmund’s mettle were unmatched by any other in the free company besides that of the siblings. Forget the Fiefguard—those two brutes were mountains more menacing than even the standard Londosian knight. In all the battlefields of their braving have they known naught but triumph.

And on this night was this no more apparent. Four fronts, four frays—though each theatre was small in intensity, reinforce it with either of these men, and the scales would tip most asudden. Such was their strength.

But to bring *both* to bear at a single point? Theodor frowned, still dim to his sister's designs. Rolf had renown enough, sure, but what hunter looses two tigers upon a rat?

"Necessity..." Theodor guessed. "Is that what nags you?"

"It is. Though Reason remains silent," Viola confessed.

The Zaharte captain was ever the careful leader. But this was caution verging on overkill, Theodor felt. Yet he did little but seal his lips and comply. A sellsword's hunch was keener than most, and if one as honed as Viola's blew alarums at the thought of Rolf Buckmann, then surely would her worries find warrant.

That same captain cast her eyes back down to the map. Seeing her mien so grave, Theodor thought anew.

Viola: his blood-sister.

Ever by his side, ever his ally, come what may.

It was she who gave him cause enough to keep the fight.

But in merely fancying her a foe for a moment, Theodor almost drowned in dread. And that alone was enough for him to feel what Brigadier Felicia herself might have felt. The vice-captain knew not what fork it was that split the paths of the Buckmann siblings so starkly. Nevertheless, such partings surely precipitate only sorrow.

Too much a sorrow for me to bear? Theodor wondered. *Should the day ever dawn where we are lost from one another... I shudder to think...*

“Theodor.”

A voice like velvet, reeling him back to reality. Theodor looked to his sister, finding her smiling gently back.

“It’s all right,” she said.

“...What is?”

“Us. We’ll always be together.”

“I... don’t recall saying aught—”

Straightway, Viola thrust her face close to Theodor’s. Then, with a tapping finger upon her brother’s breast, broke open a broad smile and said to him:

“I hear your heart.”

Theodor chuckled nervously. Never in their many winters together was he ever able to conceal aught from his sister’s ken.

“S-so, will the man himself show up, you think? This ‘Rolf Buckmann’?” he broached, as though to hide away what blush his sister’s simmering boldness might have teased from his cheeks. This effort, too, was full-fathomed by Viola, but she humoured him, anyway.

“Nay...” she answered, drawing back, “...not likely, at least. Not at the fray. Sure enough, we can assume the figure Felicia had espied at Balasthea was not the ungraced himself. After all, both she and the Fiefguard commanders

made their doubt clear: not without odyl could so many foes be felled at once.”

“A mete point,” Theodor remarked.

“Though I rather prefer he rear his face in this fight,” admitted Viola, to which her brother nodded in agreement. Ulrik and Sigmund were set loose, and not against them both could Rolf ever hope to escape with his hide—not in direct combat, no. But should the ungraced prove himself worthy of Viola’s caution, well, all the better to behead him at the soonest. “Whichever way, defeat be his if fight he dares,” Viola continued, “no matter how sweetly the fates may smile upon him.”

Along with those words: a hand alighting upon the spear set beside the captain. Hers was no boast, but rather a blunt assessment. Whatever teeth and talons the black sheep might hide under his shroud, he would fare not in the slightest against Viola’s battle-zeal, for she was of the Östberg siblings, spear-devouts renowned throughout the realm. Of fearful note was her weapon, a spear inspiring terrible winds in its wake, a spiteful spire just as famed as its mistress for all the ruin it has wrought.

Viola’s eyes narrowed. At once, Theodor sensed a chill in the air. About his gentle and loving sister, there swirled a stinging, snapping pall. Remembering anew what violence Viola could easily invite, Theodor inly shuddered as sweat broke out along the length of his back.



Nary a cloud marked the moonlit sky. In its stead was a battle boiling far below, a war waged by night alike to the sacking of Hensen, but unlike in one way: *we* were the aggressors.

Under my command strove a division of braves, their arms and magicks tasked to the fall of Arbel's fourth northerly gate. Certainly curious that the Nafílim should fight by orders of a Man, but with reasoned heads and Lise's vouching, the arrangement found no resistance.

For their part, our foes feigned no strength greater than their due. Defenders of ill-defensible gates, couching hares harried in concert—the Fiefguard's diminished numbers were indeed proving a poor dam against our tide of braves. Soon enough, their mettle failed at last, a development heralded by a long and undulating boom through the air.

In the same moment, amidst the crush and clashes of arms, a call came to my ears:

“Commander! It's done!”

To the gate I glanced. Beyond the smoke: a massive grille gaping open, marred by many Nafílim magicks. “We've a long way yet!” I cried back. “Don't let up!”

Unfain for surrender, the Fiefguard salliers then rallied with reinforcements in the portcullis' passage, fast forming a column to bar our breach. Their lord's life was on the line; if his head fell, with it would go the whole of their home, the march of Ström itself. This, the gate defenders well-fathomed. Thus did desperation quicken their courage, spur their speed, and give ghastliness to their very gazes. Bravery burns more brightly in a cornered cur than a complacent lion, and so bracing ourselves all the more, my braves fought forth with all due caution.

Though for my part, caution was the costlier course. Loath was I to linger in the rearguard and dictate the battle unassailed. What's more, my cause laid with the Nafílim now; to walk with them, I needed their trust. I needed to *fight*. Thus did I find myself at the fore of our offence, cutting through the enemy vanguard and laying lightless steel upon their rank-and-file.

It was then that another report reached my ears.

“Commander! Our sister forces've gained the other gate!

“Understood!” I cried in answer.

Lise and her contingent, too, sounded to be faring well. A glad tidings, for on this night, only hers and mine composed the main thunder of the Nafílim's lightning. Elsewhere at the eastern gates, Volker played the partisan commander, dictating his two smaller contingents of cavalry in further harrying and drawing out the city defenders. Such was their sole duty, hence it fell to us at the north to breach the fief-burgh.

Hounding the enemy, pouncing upon them at opportunity, and pinning them down in place—a tactic employed by the Nafílim many a time before against the defences of Balasthea... and all with forces numbering but a few. Under the war-chief's command, this night saw that exact expertise put on perfect display. The result: a chaos sown amongst the defenders, one reaped as fruits of advantage by our main forces at the north.

Truth be told, our success hinged upon not two, but just one breach. It mattered little whether it was my force or Lise's that entered Arbel first: the sooner invaders were not to charge straight to the margrave's manor, but rather wind

to the other gate and strike the defenders from behind, and from there reunite with the other three forces.

Battlecries crescendoed. Again the Fiefguard faltered. Into the streets now spilt the currents of combat. Rallying, the defenders attempted to array themselves, only to be beset as I broke straight into their file.

“Sseh!” Black steel blasted through air and armour.

“Eaaagh!?” screamed a Fiefguardsman. Blood burst from his bosom as the *svortaskan* cleaved through metal and bone. His fresh corpse sparked new fear in his fellow soldiers, who then fled swiftly like spiderlings afore a famished crow. In their wake was left a gaping hole in their formations.

This was it. The momentum was ours. A little more, and —

—the thought severed.

From their rearguard rushed forth a storm of a man.

“Rrryyyaaahh!”

“Hn!?”

Sparks flashed. Shocked steel stung the air.

A hammer-blow of a blade, biting deep into my last-second guard, with power enough to push me back by two whole passūs. Reeling, I felt in my arms a mad tingle, as though the impact had shaken them to the very bone.

There—now to my side: the blur of a spear, bent on stabbing me through. I broke away, avoiding the spearpoint.

Nay—it was no mere spear.

For it was not retracted as spearmen oft do post-thrust, but shifted straightway into a half-circle sweep, intent on maiming its mark—with the keen axe-blade upon its head.

Spying it for an instant, I bent down low—“*Hhup!*”—and back-rolled at once. Hewn air blew above me like a gust. Yet in danger, I dared another leap back, distancing myself further from the fray. Fast on my feet again, I stared sharply at my new foes, finding them two in number. One bore a sword. The other: “...A halberd, is it...”

A spear with an axe on one face, and at the other, a protruding blade, shaped like the sharpened bill of a bird: the thrice-threatening halberd, seldom seen in Londosius.

As for the duo themselves, they were clearly not of the Fiefguard rabble. No; *sellswords* seemed more on the mark.

“*Hwahhah!* Came to catch the bull by the ‘orns, an’ wot’s this I find!” the swordsman cried, with canines full-bare. His height reached a mite lower than mine, but brimmed with bulk nonetheless. Wildly grown was his olive-dark hair, his mien coarse and uncouth. No doubt he wielded the sword with savagery to match. “Black ‘air, black eyes!” he barked on. “A beast o’ a diff’rent breed! ‘Rolf Butt-mince’, ain’t ya!?”

“I am,” I barked back bluntly. “Just ‘Rolf’ serves.”

Mine was no chivalrous introduction, but a bait. Of all the fighters in this front, I measured these two the most terrible of them all: hell-hounds to be leashed in, lest my braves fall to their ferocity.

“I ‘eard ye be too much a babe fer battle, but looks like th’rumours’ve reckoned ye awrong, eh?” spoke the halberdier. His stature matched his mate’s, whilst about his pate grew a turf of dull-gold hair, all shaved to a wiffle. Lumber-like were his neck and arms, boasting of all the other brawn hiding beneath his armour. And if his prior attack was aught to go by, in them was not only power, but deathly precision. “No matter,” he said. “Th’bells be tollin’, mate. Into th’grave with ye!”

As though on cue, the swordsman slowly began to poise himself for the pounce. “Oh, but let’s ‘ave a bit o’ sport ‘fore the burial, shall... *we!*”

An explosion of steps. Such speed—the swordsman swooped in, heaving his hewer down unto me, the strike shouldering a mountain of momentum.

—*Gkhahhnn!*

Blades clashed and clapped like thunder.

I had pride in my physique, but the impact proved heavier than I could handle. I faltered for an instant, humbled, yet the exchange repeated without relent. One more strike, and then another—vying metals shrieked in my ears as I guarded against the swordsman’s bear-like blade-swipes.

The force of it all trickled down to my very fingertips. Every swing of his was a waterfall of fury. But in the violence was revealed vulnerabilities enough. With patience, I could pierce one of them and land a lethal blow...

...if only this were a one-on-one.

—*Ffwoohh!*

Another howl of hewn air.

The halberd sailed in, not in a stab, but a wide swing helmed by its axe-head.

As I'd thought: the halberdier was honed of eye and arm, for the sweep of his weapon was aimed squarely at my legs. A smart target; in bearing myself against the swordsman's maniacal cleaves had my feet been fixed to the ground. But with the axe-blade well on its way to them, time was already up: an unscathed escape was impossible.

—*Vsshrt!*

Redness streaked from my leg.

I'd leapt back at the last slice of a second, avoiding the axe-blade but not the odyl wreathing it. My shin paid with a shallow wound, a fair price for what could've been a lost leg.

The swordsman scowled. "Oi, wot's up with this wanker, ah? 'E should've peg'd it ten times by now!"

"'Ere I were thinkin' I shear'd off 'is shanks. Bugger," said the halberdier, sucking his teeth.

The duo's faces furrowed with fresh caution. I answered with a reassumed centre guard, keeping them both in my sight as we slowly circled each other.

"Mismannered much?" I asked them sharply. "You had me spit out my name. Why not return the favour?"

"Hah!" the swordsman scoffed. "You fancy us knights prim an' proper-like!? Well, a fico for you, Bitch-moose! Names be nothin' on the battlefield!"

“Yea,” the halberdier sneered threateningly. “If ye be so keen fer court’sy, why not wring us names out o’ us throats, then, eh?”

These two were quickly proving a pair of barbs, deep on the prick. But the halberdier—he could be laid low sooner. Rush in, cut him down in close quarters... a valid gambit. Decided, I began biding for the ripe moment.

Only, there was a rub: the halberdier hardly seemed the one-trick churl. His thrusts, I could evade. Their imbued ody, as well. But doubtless he’d garnish his wicked menu from here on—likely with post-thrust swings sent straight to my neck.

That halberd of his looked the heftier of its varied brethren. Dauntingly so. Its axe-blade boasted both broadness and thickness, an unmaker of armour; wielding so top-heavy a weapon much seemed like leashing a livid lion. Yet this halberdier was handling that exact feat, to much finesse... and my peril.

But in my hands was a lion of my own, one with no less heft.

A match of mighty arms it is, then. I’ll not avoid his next attack—I’ll stop it, instead.

Just as the thought finished, a weighty whoosh sounded: the halberd, charging in. I answered. Metals clashed and groaned.

“*Hmgh!?*” grunted the halberdier, visibly surprised. Likely a first for him, to be halted by a single sword. Unceasing, I moved to seize the moment, but the attempt was swiftly cut short.

"Khrrraahh!!" the other foe roared, rushing in with a down-cleave from the high guard. I broke to the side, skirting it by a wide margin. Distancing myself further from the halberdier, I next trained my eyes to the swordsman, who returned the look.

"Come on, mate! Pretendin' the turtle? That your play, Rolf Bint-milker!?" he taunted. "Even turtles know to bite back!"

"Do they, now? Cunning creatures, turtles," I humoured him.

But his point pierced the mark: I had to strike back, lest "Rolf the timid terrapin" be full-writ on my headstone. That said, dancing with so deadly a duo demanded all caution. A careless step, and I'd be left a long smear on these streets.

Steadying my breaths, I stared at them anew, seeking the ever-elusive opening.

It was then that a comrade called to me.

"Commander! The other gate's breached!"

Good news to my ears, but hardly so for the duo.

"Bloody 'ell!" the swordsman cried with a strike of his tongue. "Flaccid Fief-cocks, the lot o' them!"

"This is sour," said the halberdier. "They'll be peltin' in soon fer th'pincer, they will."

He had the right of it. Lise and her braves were most certainly making their way here. And once they arrive, any defenders yet lagging would find all escape severed.

“Then best we clean ‘ouse an’ shog off, innit?” said the swordsman, readying himself anew.

“Music t’me ears,” the halberdier echoed.

“The pincer comes, and *still* you tarry to tussle...” I remarked lowly. “You both bleat for battle as wasters pine for poppy.”

Laughter belched and boomed. “Aha hahahh! Says the priest puffin’ the same pipe!” the swordsman retorted, before straightway rushing in to resume our fight. His diction lingering bitterly in my ears, I resteeled my stance and gripped the soot-steel all the more tightly.

————— ∴ —————

“Time’s up, turtle! To the butcher’s block with you!!”

—*Gkhakh! Khhaeen!*

Bashing blades tolled through Arbel’s benighted air. Afore me was my frenzied foe, battering away at my guard. Constraining his every strike was neither doctrine nor discipline; no, his was the sword of instinct, the mind of a fencer fighting by feel. Such I gleaned as his blade barked and bellowed in from the blindest of angles, nigh-snaring me with each swing.

The violence was not solely physical, either, for much odyll trailed and buttressed the swordsman’s storm-like challenge. A violence that surely would’ve made minced

meat out of me were it not for the sword of soot in my hands.

Impact after impact, shock after shock, the force of it all flew from the black blade down to my very bones.

“Who’s the bull here...!?” I thought aloud, clenching my teeth.

This swordsman—sheer strength was not his only forte, but also the imbuelement of his weight into every cut. My very arms were taking a beating from merely fending off his fury.

Much of my own sword-mettle was moulded in the formal training of my greener days; to face a sword so foreign to that familiar logic was proving my undoing. His stances, his footwork—all ignored the norms. Ill-guessing his coming moves, I soon found myself answering his assault either overlate or under-steeled.

But that wasn’t the end of it. Even were I to scry an opening in the swordsman’s maelstrom, curtailing any capitalisation would be the halberd, sailing in from the side.

To wit:

“Off with ye!” cried the halberdier.

“Not today!” I shouted, striking aside the thrust and breaking away from any sweep that might’ve followed. But the escape afforded little respite.

“Come back ‘ere, Bush-mouse!”

Thundering in straightway was the swordsman—unwaning stamina, too, seemed a strength of his. Our song

of swords resumed, in which course glinted the glee of battle in my foe's fevered eyes. Mine glared gravely as I watched my opponent with all mustered composure. Dire though my plight was, I spied some hope, assuming my defence could endure. For in that moment, I knew at last the method to this swordsman's madness—and how best to unmake it: this bear of a man was ever borne by the winds of his own wildness, swinging and swinging away with abandon, blind to any secret blade abiding his blunder.

True, his was a self-smithed style, but that ill-equated to uniqueness, for there were other styles alike to his; namely, those favouring the fatal strike to the exclusion of feints and rebuffs. Such practitioners wore themselves upon the blade, endowing every slash the whole of their might and momentum. This foe of mine was scarce different.

Perilous pressure was his game, a gambit to force his foes into guarding, to bear his brunt down upon their very bones and wholly root them in place. The snared opponent, then, is left with little to do but guard and guard, ever late on the answer and never solaced by a solution.

The weapon to pierce this impasse, then, was naught else but the blade of absolute resolve. Decided, I continued guarding, seeking the soonest sign of opportunity, a period not unharried by the halberdier as he stabbed and swept from the deadliest of angles and most dire of timings. Still, I could not break here. On and on, I awaited the wind of chance, all the while fending off and foiling sword and halberd alike.

"Bloody brussen, this weasel!" the halberdier hissed.

"Aach! Die already!!" With that howling cry, the swordsman heaved his blade up to the high guard.

There it was.

The straight-down stroke—my patience paid off.

Aimed at my skull was the blurring sword, imbued with such might so as to split the skies themselves.

My answer: the exact same stroke.

The swordsman's mien—“*Kh!?*”—flashed with surprise at my foolhardy hew. But too late: vertical versus vertical, our skyward swords arched, plunged, and clashed at the subtlest of angles. Two half-circles, meeting like scissor blades, but the soot-steel's proved the mightier momentum as it bit the foe-sword's central ridge.

—*Khaheeen!*

Both weapons plunged further on down, but victorious in the contest, the *svortaskan* struck the enemy metal against the cobblestones below like a hammer-beat upon an anvilled blade.

The “vieglance”—a technique secret and arcane amongst some schools of sword-thought. And risky besides; glad was I that this first field attempt succeeded.

“*Ggwagh...!?*” the swordsman grimaced. Though harrowed by the shock, his hands yet held fast to his hilt. Only, the higher half of the blade was lost, broken clean by the blacksword. A most expected outcome; the sheer weight of wolfsteel would've exacted no lesser toll.

From there, I began shifting to the low guard for the follow-up, but glimpsing this, the swordsman did not choose retreat.

No. He lunged forth, instead.

“Rrwooaaaa—hh!!”

Low but unstoned, the soot-steel shot up in response, slicing an up-line on my foe’s cheek. Skin split open, blood spat out. But the swordsman ceased little as he drove his pate forth in a headbutt.

“Gugh!?” I reeled back, struck straight upon the side of my face. The swordsman, too, was no less shook as he shambled in place. Dazed, he dared an indignant scream.

“Daaamn yeeuuu!!”

My sentiments exactly. This bull of a man was proving a pain in the arse, but such was the naked nature of the battlefield. All prior practice amounted to mere preparation for this hard-learned lesson. I had but to swallow the bitter medicine, to live and turn trial to true strength.

“Out th’way, Sigmund!” the halberdier hollered.

“Shut it an’ shog off, will ya!?” the swordsman spat back.

The duo seemed more scavengers scrambling for the same scraps than a well-tuned team. In practice, their play saw little beyond the swordsman handling the immediate fight, with the halberdier simply sniping away at easy openings. A tactic most serviceable, but hardly stellar. Had these two meshed any more tightly, I might’ve been pushing up daisies by now.

“Tch!” tutted the halberdier, before hastily relocating and launching a stab of his spearpoint. Disoriented though I was, I managed a deflection with the soot-steel before flying

forth immediately unto his midst. “*Uwofh!?*” came his dismay.

Over the course of this combat had I scried his scheme. Not for the mired *mêlée* was the halberd made. It instead craved space and breath, away from crannies and corners that might catch it. For his part, the halberdier had lost his stride: angered at his nuisance of a partner, the axe-sweep was an option lost to him. The thrust, then, was his sole choice—and my chance.

Having closed in, I readied the sword of soot, holding it to the side in a single hand.

“*Hn!!*” The sight of it stirred a light in the halberdier’s eyes. And then, a smirk: he’d found my opening.

Opposite of his axe-blade was the talon-like barb, one he’d used not once this entire contest. No doubt to numb my mind to its existence and, at the ripest opportunity, punish my ignorance with it.

Thus I thought to hand him the opportunity myself. That barb-blade of his—it lost to the axe in lethality, for it wasn’t meant to lay down the cut. Instead, it served to snare and snag, exactly as it was doing now to the sword of soot.

At once, the halberdier flicked his wrists to reel in his catch, but before he could, I immediately answered, two-handing the black-hilt. Easy enough when anticipated; bringing its full weight to bear, I sent the soot-steel straight down—*gkackk!*—slamming the halberd hard against the cobblestones.

“*Ungh!?*” its wielder yelped, falling to the same folly as his mate’s. But unlike the latter, the halberd was wrenched from his hands.

My mark, now unarmed.

I lurched forth at once for the felling.

“*Yehgh!*”

“*Uaafh!!*”

—*Sshhrr!*

Through the paling the *svǫrtaskan* sliced, and there found the halberdier’s breast.

“*Gwah...*” he groaned grimly. “...Bloomin’ ‘ell!!”

But the man was yet a professional: at the last slice of a second had he retreated, leaving the soot-steel to taste but a shallow cut from his bosom.

“Oi, Ulrik!!” cried the swordsman.

“Sigmund”. “Ulrik”. Swordsman and halberdier. Their names I now knew.

“*Ehgh...* yer a dead man, you...!” Ulrik scowled at me, gripping his warm gash as blood dripped from his fingers. Tightening mine anew about the *svǫrtaskan*’s hilt, I headed back in for the kill.

But just as my first step stamped, so did the earth tremble—into my ears then rushed a great rumble of hoofbeats.

“...*Mn!?*”

I halted—now galloping in right before Ulrik’s last rites were many horse riders, severing the space between myself and the wounded halberdier.

“Ulrik! Sigmund! Th’devils be floodin’ in from North-One!” hollered one of the horsemen—and a sellsword comrade, from the sound of him. “They mean t’flank us! Come—let’s quit this grave whilst we can!”

Lise and her braves were right near, then. Met with the bitter report, Ulrik and Sigmund both turned their stinging stares to me.

“...A stalemate,” Ulrik hissed as he hurried on up to horseback. “Thass all ye’ll savour from this!”

Sigmund followed suit, giving me one last glare before mounting a different steed. They weren’t wasting any time; a moment, and my two foes were whisked away, leaving me in the dust. And just like that, the herd of horsemen hasted away into Arbel’s bowels.

...A “stalemate”.

So reckoned Ulrik of our contest.

I stood there, silent and reckoning quite differently from the halberdier. Had we went on as we did, victory should’ve been mine, surely. But those men were of a particular lot. For them, life and death decided the score. And so long as they yet drew breath, ours remained a draw: not before one side was extinguished could this battle know its end. Such was what their fiery eyes told me.

“Commander!” called one of my braves, who, too, had been battling anear. “Have you taken wound!?”

“Just a scratch,” I answered.

Our gazes next trained to the receding sellswords, finding in their tow a rush of fleeing Fiefguardsmen. The

nightly offence was a success; the Nafílim flag, too, should fly soon above this gate.

“Forgive us,” the brave said, turning to me. “Our aid was ill-lent.”

I shook my head. “Nay. To each soldier, his own duty. There’s naught to forgive.” Airing those words, my thoughts bent back to the battle. I was convinced anew: that duo’s was a strength mountains above the Fiefguard grunts. And as though to settle my suspicions, emblazoned upon the sellswords’ saddles were designs of crossed spears: the emblem of the Zaharte Battalion.

No cog in the machinations of war can wheel long without knowing so infamous a name. And the two I’d just fought: likely they were of the band’s upper echelons, if their comrades’ haste in awaying them served any sign. At their top, then, should be the Östberg siblings: two-fold spear-devouts renowned throughout the realm. And if the rumours were right, those twin spears fought in flawless unison—doubtless a more lethal threat than my prior opponents.

“More spiders to this web than I’d like...” I thought aloud, looking up to the night. There, the waning moon was beginning its ascent up the eastern reaches. Without knowing why, I then found myself fixed upon its pale brilliance.

∴

Beneath benighted skies was a little girl, gazing up at the flame-felled townscape of Hensen. It was till not a day ago that she was sheltered in a settlement elsewhere, hid from the hungry eyes of marauding Men—but not from souls of solace: Hensenite soldiers, they were, who had come to deliver the last living vestiges of her village. Thus was she saved and whisked away to this fólkheimr.

But in her time with them, she saw the soldiers' spirits grow pale with great unease, for it happened that on the same day, the winds of war had reached their own home of Hensen.

What she, her saviours, and her fellow refugees had found at the fólkheimr, however, were but the fading embers of that battle, with the Mennish invaders all slain or long fled. A section of the townscape was scorched to ruin, but that in itself was a miracle. Worse could have transpired: the whole of Hensen, sinking into seas of flame, its folk either felled or carted off in manacles.

Yet such did not come to pass. Indeed, though few were lost, none were snatched away. None at all.

Much relief this brought to the little girl. For whilst Hensen was spared, her own home was not. Oh, the horrors that had unfolded in its unmaking. Nightmares she wished dearly never to see again. Not here, not anywhere.

But now safe in the walls of Hensen, she began to look for a certain soul, who she was certain was come, as well. Yet wheresoever she searched, her efforts found no fruition. A kin of Man, of likeness unlike to the Nafílim folk—such was the soul's semblance, sure to strike the eyes from amongst the crowds of Hensenites. But struck her eyes were

not. No matter how far she wandered, no matter how long she looked.

She tried enquiring her saviours of the soul she sought, but to no avail. They knew naught and—regular rank-and-file that they were—knew neither that this very person had, in truth, dealt Hensen the dear hand of deliverance.

But when asked in return for the name of this person, the little girl could not answer.

For it was unknown to her.

A soul unforgettable, yet unnamed—the weight of that woe now sat more heavily on her heart than ever.

Up at the surrounding townscape she looked once more. Its burnt and blackened husk hid the fortunate fact that few folk were slain, yet bared most nakedly the brutality of the battle itself. Was *he* safe? Spared from the swords and spells of that battle? Within this fólkheimr that was, to *him*, a veritable fastness of foes? This, she wondered.

And as she did, thoughts of the worst scenarios welled up from within. A nightmare most morbid, a fancy most affrighting, an end most dark—just imagining them well-made her ready to claw away at her own bosom.

Oh, how she wished for *his* well-being.

For his living breath, for the mercy of the fates upon his hard-lived lot.

But to the little girl, tragedy was an ever-chasing chariot. She had grown weary of wishing, fearful of believing.

Yet *he* was different.

Never did *he* stop believing. Never did *he* surrender, nor deceive, nor damn *himself* to remorse. *He* was as a lodestar, showing her, *teaching* her that hope was not to be abandoned, that wishing yet had its worth.

Thus dearly did she wish to believe.

Dearly did she wish hers a heart yet fain for faith.

But always would the woeful shadows spring up from the depths of her bosom. To tear away at her. To torment her to all tiredness.

Were that her heart had strength enough to weather such wiles. This, she wistfully thought, and in so doing, she looked up to the soot-black sky.

Not yet did she know.

That to this moment still was *he* fighting.

Confronting the killing fray for a gentler future, for a promise made.

Up the waning moon went. Up and up through the eastern mirk, a slow, white star wheeling to the west. In the little girl's eyes did such splendour show.

Would that *he* could see the same. What gladness, what joy would she know.

Such was her one wish upon that night.

— IV —

The margrave's manor.

Having found his upper-storey office too stifled, the lord had descended to the great hall where, for an aching while, he paced to and fro. No other soul was present in the echoing space. He had sent for certain persons, sure enough, but their arrival was overlate.

Oh, long indeed was the night prior. Bright beams now breathed through the towering windows, welcoming in the clean and clear mirth of morning. Yet such sweet air was ill-savoured; the margrave's mien was most grim, pricked and prodded by impatience. The reason: his fief-burgh was forayed, his defences *defeated*. To this moment were the Nafílim invaders strutting through his streets, and he could do naught but let his city suffer their stains.

Two of his gates to the north were attacked, their defenders failing against the foe's forces before allowing the latter into Arbel proper. Two more gates to the east were harried, as well, and though they thankfully held the line, such success served no solace, for doubtless the enemies there would wind about to the north and welcome themselves in.

The Nafílim, pressing into Arbel with numbers unanswerable—never had such a nightmare haunted the hills and homes of Ström till this day. Many generations of the margrave's line had looked after these lands for the

Crown, but now did so enduring a history stand to be hewn, upon whose generation but *his*.

The margrave stopped, grimacing at the foreboding boiling up from within.

His own death.

The end of House Ström.

Notions never once a visitor in his thoughts. But the present found them increasingly palpable, a cruel reality roaring louder and louder at his ears. Rattled and wroth, the margrave struck his heel against the marble floor. And as if on cue, a new echo sounded: double doors creaking open, through which then entered the Östberg siblings with Sigmund in tow.

“Excellency,” Viola addressed the lord, bowing. “Your bidding?”

“Late you are. And lacking a head...” remarked the margrave, looking suspiciously at his guests. Verily had he called for the leaders of the Zaharte Battalion to meet him here, though when last he met them, they numbered four. “That shaven-pate churl—where is he?”

“...Ulrik recuperates in the infirmary,” answered Viola. “An ill-turn he took. But not to worry; he plainly hungers for the soonest return to the fray.”

“And this fellow of yours, too, tumbled down the same turn, I take it?” the margrave pointed out, scowling at Sigmund.

“*Tch...*” clucked the swordsman’s tongue. On his cheek was pasted a cloth poultice, concealing a blade-wound.

Hardly aught unmendable by magicks, but for whatever reason, he had chosen instead to eschew the enchanted treatment.

The margrave sucked his teeth. "...I suffer your boorish brood that you might serve a beacon in this darkest of hours. 'Bid us battle and boons be upon you.' Whose words were those, hm? *Whose?*"

Lines of lividness, but delivered without dynamism; it would seem the margrave was weary and well at the end of his wits. Viola cast her eyes down discerningly and offered an unresistant answer.

"...Ours, Excellency."

Her own disappointment cut no less deep. In hopes of completely crushing the main enemy force had she deployed Ulrik and Sigmund to the northern front. But having met their seeming match, those very hopes were utterly dashed.

A disappointment, indeed. And a sore surprise.

"Yet never did we presume such power could be wielded by this Rolf Buckmann," the Zaharte captain continued.

"'Power'?" echoed the margrave, bending up a brow. "That *ungraced?* Taking sword in hand and hewing our men? I should sooner believe a bloodlusting hare did the deed."

"He was heard clearly claiming the name of 'Rolf', Excellency," Viola explained. "Eyes on the ground, too, attest to him matching the commandant's mien."

"*Hmng...*" the margrave heatedly groaned. This was not to be believed. And neither did he wish to. A mistake of a

man, disavowed by the Deiva—an ungraced, *vanquishing* those *wielding* grace?

Impossible.

A heretic of a happening.

Whatever foreboding the margrave felt before, now ballooned into a morbid image, a future finding his flesh sundered by the sword of that selfsame ungraced. A lamb, ever loving of Yoná the shepherd, now set to be slain by some ragged wolf? What nightmare was this?

Why, none other than a vision veering far from all rightness and reason.

“...Be that as it may,” the margrave spoke at last, “at present does the enemy loiter in my city... The hour-sand empties—I must act.”

“Your Excellency,” said Viola. “The hostiles to the east have moved; they’ve entered the fief-burgh from the north, and regroup with the rest of their companions as we speak. Once rallied and reorganised, likely they shall march anew at the soonest.”

And so they would. Such was the Zaharte captain’s hard-gained conclusion: if the past two battles taught her aught, it was that the enemy was capable, and arrantly so, at that. They proved formidable enough when split in four... and now they meant to merge and set every blade loose upon the margrave’s neck. So dread a momentum must not be left unchecked.

“That I know,” snapped the lordly mark. “My men make no less haste to muster an answer.”

But too much haste and one hurries only to the grave. This the margrave learnt well, for the battle of Balasthea was a bitter teacher. Unbolstered by preparation and spurred on by false intelligence, there were his men struck a cunning blow.

Never again. *Never.*

One trap was more than enough for the margrave, and so was he easily content with reamassing for defence what little remained of his men, rather than having them spring zealously upon unrallied foes.

For her part, Viola was much relieved that, despite his dire plight, the margrave was yet sound of judgement. She had well-thought him fain for another fool offensive, and one straightway, no less. Not that any could blame her: long has the margrave waged war with the Nafílim, and fewer tongues were more swift to savour their misery than his.

“And so have we,” she echoed. “Our mobile detachments are returned and rallying presently, Lord. We shall be ready for fresh orders soon enough.”

“As you should,” returned the margrave, before facing Viola in full. “Captain. I bid some of your number accompany me.”

Ever so slightly did the elder Östberg narrow her eyes at those words. “...You will depart the fief-burgh, Excellency?”

Viola was nothing if not sharp. To “flee” or “quit” the city—she dared no such diction before the fraught margrave.

“I shall. The whole of Ström sits upon my shoulders. And should I fall, it goes with me, deep into the dust... I must needs head to Tallien at once,” he clarified. Right to the east

laid the viscounty of Tallien, a fitting shelter for a lord in flight. In fact, that was his very intention. “You know much of my neighbour, do you not? Zaharte’s deeds number many over in that land, I hear.”

“An honour, Lord,” answered Viola, bowing. “Indeed, the lay of Tallien is intimate to many of my men; you will find no better bodyguards than they.”

“Very well. Assign them to me all the sooner.”

The margrave then nodded to the Zaharte captain. At the same time, her brother also sent to her a gaze of his own. The remnant forces in Arbel—more must needs be known of their duties from here on, now that their master meant to leave them to the Nafílim wolves.

Viola returned a confirming look to Theodor.

“Lord Ström,” she began broaching. “Might I ask, what shall be our charge, henceforth?”

“The Fiefguard shall be ordered to stall the enemy till I have long cleared the city walls,” the margrave explained. “And you, Captain: you shall be the one to give them those very orders.”

He looked clothed enough in calm as he aired those words, but in the seams there seethed spouts of displeasure, for it full-punctured his pride to so willingly hand command over *his* Fiefguard to these sellsword scum. Yet the luxury of choice was long lost to him, gone with the many dead captains of his men.

It all fell to Viola, then, copiously practised in leadership and combat command as she was. Such was the situation at hand. Such was his sole choice.

But bending her brows was a look of confusion. "...I am to lead them, Excellency?"

Having her own men escort the margrave in his flight was not to be argued. After all, it was his coffers that contained their recompense, and not by his dead hand would the locks be undone.

No, what worried Viola was "risk", for to stay in Arbel and make battle with broken numbers was a danger beyond daring.

"Correct. If I can hie me to safety, then you need only hold till Central's reinforcements arrive. And then shall I requite you all the more handsomely," the margrave assured her. "But you will not go unaided, Captain. I've designs enough for your defence."

"...What might be those designs, if I may ask?"

"Hark. To break Arbel, our foe must needs capture three key points: this manor, the Fiefguard's garrison, and..." to the windows his eyes turned, "...the concentration camp."



The margrave's manor, the Fiefguard garrison—Arbel's respective seats of policy and police. Small wonder why the Nafílim horde should hunger for their fall. But the concentration camp? Hardly the heart beating in the fief-burgh's bosom, as it were.

Yet this was the far march of Ström, straddling right up against Nafílim country from which it has reaped a great many “boons of war”, as its soldiery and slavers were wont to term it. And what better coffer to contain such brimming “riches” than a concentration camp?

A veritable trove, indeed, ever the dirty buttress to Arbel’s weal. But in the eyes of Rolf and his newfound friends, it sparkled with a different light—of vanished friends and family, of lovers lost yet unforgotten, of forlorn souls to be sold to a life of drudgery most unjust. No doubt, then, that the Nafílim enemy should eventually seek their immediate emancipation.

“Of these, I appoint the camp as our final fastness,” so resolved the margrave to his Zaharte guests. “A stronghold must needs be made of it. A quagmire to unmake the enemy!”

His will was well-warranted. A military headquarters though it was, the Fiefguard garrison was, in practice, little more than an array of offices and training grounds; a house of cards could boast of a sturdier defence than it ever can. And of course, naught needs be said of the lord’s manor itself.

That left the concentration camp. Myriad and maze-like were its walls, and with a watchtower to boot, its dreadful and dreary spans shone as the most defensible of the three pillars. Yet that alone ill-allayed the Östbergs’ worries.

Beside his sister stood a serious-faced Theodor, thick in thought, whilst for his part, Sigmund could not have cared any less for the conversation, and so had long left his eyes to wander like those of a witless fish.

“Abandon the manor, muster ourselves at the camp... and there lay our last stand,” Viola wondered aloud. “Theodor. What reckon you of this?”

“I... reckon it rather sound,” her brother answered greyly, “if not for our dwindled numbers, that is...”

“Hold there,” the margrave hastily said. “I have plans enough, if you should lend an ear.”

His portance was dimming with desperation. Needs and desires filled his head. A need to have the Zaharte hellions dig in their heels and defend his fief. A desire to have Viola helm the very effort, to unite both his Fiefguardsmen and her sellswords together in buying him precious time. For above all else, the margrave wished to be whisked away at once to safety, and the scoundrels before him were his only wings.

Yes, desperate, indeed, the margrave, as he verily pleaded for Viola’s heedance. What a damning difference from the lordliness displayed only yesterday.

But undressed of his dread authority, Aaron Ström was not unlike the next man: blind to his own blunders, never minding his meek and mistaken self that his mirrors much warn of. Yet the real rub was in how he might yet project a princely portrait, even as he was but a cornered creature, newly enlightened to the shallowness of his strength.

Such was what Viola now discerned in the margrave. She sighed. Mixed in her mien was pity for the poor lord. But that pity all but pounced past his pate as he continued speaking.

“A herald shall hie hence and to our foes proffer this ultimatum: stand down, or we will cull the captives—each

and every one!”

“...Hostages, then, Your Excellency?” asked Viola. The proposed connivery confounded her little. In fact, she was convinced it could well-serve the stout rope out of this hole. Not that it would inspire even the faintest idea of surrender in the Nafílim, no. Mettle and momentum were on their side, no mistake there—but this ploy just might give the push the defenders needed to turn the tables. Say, for instance, an offer to free some prisoners, all in exchange for the exiting of enemy troops from the fief-burgh.

“Hostages, indeed,” the margrave confirmed, before glancing to a side door. “And speak of the devil...”

Into the great hall then came a Fiefguardsman. In tow: a barefoot boy of a Nafíl—not more than six, seven years young.

Viola eyed him, coldly inquisitive. “What’s this?”

“A message,” was the margrave’s curt reply.

A knowing nod. “...Ah.”

The ultimatum was no bluff—such must be made explicitly clear to the enemy. And to prove it, this Nafílim boy would serve as the first scapegoat.

“A warm corpse should make a brilliant banner of our conviction,” proclaimed the margrave. “Might one of yours do the honours of a flag-bearer, Captain?”

“But of course, Your Excellency,” Viola flatly accepted.

And then...

...tears.

Many, many tears, welling up in the boy's eyes as he then slowly looked down. His ears had heard every word. His heart had swallowed their every meaning. But why him? There was nary a sin upon his head. An urchin of a slave, chosen on a whim. That was all he was. And yet, to place so asudden upon his little shoulders the duty of death...

The weight finally set in. Now knowing his end, the boy began to shiver and snivel, his tears quietly collecting on the floor.

"...Oi. Wot you on 'bout, ah?"

Piercing the silence: Sigmund's gruff and grating voice. Thereafter was the moment mired in another lull, till Theodor ventured forth an explanation.

"A deal, Sigmund. We guarantee the captives' lives, and our enemies guarantee their withdrawal. Simple enough." The vice-captain then half-sighed. "Though, whether they'll comply is anyone's guess, but we need only force their hand and—"

"Yea, yea, all that rubbish be right clear an' cut, coz. But that's not me point. That there," Sigmund said, then flicking his chin at the young Nafíl, "that's a *squirt*, not some soldier. Why's 'e got to be off'd, ah? Makes fuck-all sense, innit? 'E's jus' a li'l boy, for cryin' out loud!"

Veritable question marks bloomed in all the others' bosoms. None knew why Sigmund would speak such spittle.

Then, as though to give voice to their confusion, Viola addressed her subordinate thusly:

“Sigmund. I scarce see the rub here. Child or no, that’s a *Nafíl*.”

“The rub ‘ere, *Cap’n*, is that we’re *fighters*, ain’t we?” the swordsman spat back, before pointing to the boy. “That there squirt: ‘e look like ‘e’s *fightin’* back to ya? Ah?”

Despite his defiance, Sigmund earned only bewildered squints from his superiors, and as well, a spark of impatience from the margrave.

“Enough with this.” The lord looked to the Fiefguardsman. “Have it done.”

“Aye, m’liege!”

The soldier’s sword hissed from its sheath—
—and ran right through the boy’s bosom.

“*Agh...*”

A small cry, almost a whisper. A rivulet of red, spewing from little lips.

The Östbergs shut their eyes, brooking none of the sight. Not out of pity for the child, no, but for the solemn act of execution.

...Such was precisely why the siblings, warriors though they were, could neither foresee nor forestall what struck next.

“You *slag*!! Come ‘ere—!!”

“*Ghwagh—!?*”

A long blade glinted bright: erupting with rage, Sigmund sprang forth and felled the Fiefguardsman with a mighty swing of his own sword.

Utter shock flashed across the margrave’s face. “... Hellion, you! What roguery is this!?”

But Sigmund’s indignance was undampened. “Why!? Wot’s with you wankers, ah!?” he screamed, canines gnashing, hair swaying. “‘E’s jus’ a kid!! A nose-pickin’ brat, damn it!!”

It was that very “brat”, now laying limp upon the floor, whom Sigmund then took into his arms. The delicate act drenched his hands in young blood.

Red. Oh so very red.

“*Gkh... hhnnggwwoo—hh!!*” resounded a roar of roars, ruesome yet wroth. “Blood! Brat’s blood! *Aaaegh!!* All o’ you!! All o’ you be *damn’d!!*”

The great hall thundered. Sigmund’s words: vacuous yet vociferous, violently shaking the very air they rode.

“S-Sigmund!? Tame yourself!” shouted Viola, but before she could think to restrain him, someone else ventured the deed.

“Ach! Enough from you!!”

Fury, not fright, fumed from the margrave, as though teased out by Sigmund’s tantrum, for stinging his ears anew

were the former maunderings of Rolf Buckmann: that civilians, Nafílim or no, need not be senselessly slain. What folly. Vexation was all he had felt when last he had argued with that ungraced. And now was that very same vexation fully revived and revealed.

An exigency was at hand. Arbel hung on the brink, Ström was strung over the pyre, devils stood at the doorstep—and yet did this fool sellsword fain interfere *further*.

The margrave had endured much. The failure of his men, consorting with these cutthroats, ceding command over to their captain... Humiliation after humiliation. But this was the last straw. And so in his rage did he reach for the sword at his hip. A sword worn that he might look the part of the proper commander-in-chief in this challenging time.

...A sword wielded to his own woe.

For never could the margrave have proven a match for Sigmund's mettle.

And never had Sigmund meted mercy to any blade brandished against him.

"Rroooaa—hh!!"

—Zsshrt.

"Gahkh...!?"

Too swiftly had it happened. Too astonished were the siblings. There was naught they could have done.

The margrave's swordtip all but tottered about like a butterfly flitting over foreign fields. In contrast, Sigmund's was a straight brushstroke, dragging out of the lord's flesh a flood of many reds. From the margrave's bosom to the marble tiles beneath spilt a splash of warmth, thick and wet.

Aaron Ström knew not the "how" nor the "what"—nor aught of this thunderswift plight. Letting fall his blade, he bent his gaze down to his gaping breast. Only then did he know at last.

He had been cut.

He had been *killed*.

But one question lingered.

Why?

A margrave of mighty Londosius—laid low by a brute's blade.

Why?

He thought it most absurd. So devout a lamb of Yoná he had been. So devoted a slayer of the Nafílim devils. And *this* was his due?

...Why?

In seeking the answer with all speed did his mind then melt away unto naught—along with his life.

There fell his corpse onto the cold marble, afore the flabbergasted Östbergs. A corpse comforted by but one

thought before its death: of having fallen to no blade brandished by the ungraced it so despised.



The dust was long settled. The blood, the bodies—all had been wiped and whisked away to the shadows. Only silence lingered on in the great hall. And standing amidst it: a lone Viola.

After the slaying...

It was then that Sigmund had scooped up the unmoving boy and bolted from the manor. So swift was the incident that the Östbergs were left arrantly pale and petrified, but a moment, and again were they composed. After next pondering aught and all that should happen from this mishap, they then began setting their scheme into motion.

The present found Theodor outdoors, having left his sister to steep in her thoughts.

“Oi, Viola.”

Stamping now into the hall was Ulrik, his face full-puckered with fury. The retreat from Rolf Buckmann sore-stung him yet, a humbling pain all too obvious to his captain’s eyes.

“Ulrik. You seem sprightly,” Viola flatly remarked.

“Yea. An’ right ready besides,” the halberdier hissed back. True enough, Zaharte’s skilled surgians had his wound

soundly sealed up. Not the full recovery he had hoped for, of course, but reckoning a return to battle as the meeter remedy than the infirmary bed, he had thought at once to seek his superior and implore deployment. “That Rolf Buckmann...!” he seethed, clenching his fists white. “Just give th’word, Viola, an’ I’ll ‘ave ‘is guts all gouged an’ garnish’d fer th’dogs t’dine on, I will!”

“Thin your enthusiasm, will you?” she sighed in answer, slowly shaking her head. “Whether you face him again or no is mine to decide. And I’ve decided that you’d best be a good boy for the time being.”

The halberdier’s eyelids twitched. “Don’t ye go pissin’ on me parade, Viola! I’ve gots me an axe t’grind, I does!”

“Ulrik. Heed me.”

“Say wot ye wants, this score won’t settle itse—”

“*Ulrik.*”

All warmth was at once vanished from Viola’s voice. And with the morning chill yet frosting the air in the hall, Ulrik could do naught but let the combined cold cut into his skin. Her reason triumphed over his rage—the Zaharte captain was most resolute to loose him upon the ungraced *never* again. He had proven fangless in a two-on-one; weighed down with a wound, what hope had this brute now in exacting his fool revenge *alone*?

Ulrik pressed his lips shut and carefully gulped. The slight sound resounded clear through the silent hall, before: “...Bah!” he spat, turning away. “*Fine.* More time fer maimin’ mirkskins it is, then.”

“Your butcher’s block’ll be busy, I assure you,” Viola remarked without spirit.

“Hemph. An’ wot ‘bout you, eh? ‘Ere all ‘lone?” asked Ulrik, finding none of the others present. “Where be that brother o’ yers, mm? An’ Sigmund besides?”

“Theodor’s busy outside,” answered Viola just as flatly, her visage unchanging. “And as for Sigmund—he’s quit our company.”

“...Auh!?” Ulrik’s eyes widened at once, only to find Viola’s turning away swiftly without a word, as though to signal the sudden end to the topic. Espying this, the halberdier crossly curled his lips. *“Peh... Good! Spare me yer squabbles—give me ‘eads to ‘atchet an’ I’m ‘appy.”*

“Your cooperation is encouraging.”

No further did Ulrik dwell on the matter. From the outset had he always taken Sigmund for an untrustworthy churl: though theirs was hardly a long-standing partnership, Ulrik ever scried something... *astray*, deep in that swordsman. Like a tree hiding strange roots, or a room with more doors than meets the eye.

“The next battle’s a defensive one—a last stand at the concentration camp,” Viola continued. “Go seek Theodor. He’ll brief you on the rest.”

“Yea, yea,” Ulrik replied brusquely. Viola watched him with intent, pinning some hope in this yet-promising pawn of hers as he departed the great hall.

“Still here, Sis?” said Theodor, newly returned to the great hall. “The briefing’s over with. And Ulrik’s scurried off to the camp as told.”

“I see... Well-done,” Viola greyly replied.

With orders freshly handed to the few remaining Fiefguard leaders, it was high time the Östbergs headed off to the concentration camp themselves. There would they assume command of the late margrave’s men and dictate the particulars of the clash to come.

“How now, dear Sister. The margrave’s left just about all the reins to you, hasn’t he? Quite the silver lining, if there ever was one,” cheered a rather chipper Theodor.

Viola faintly smiled in return. “A fair point.”

That the Zaharte captain should be appointed as their temporal commander was something full-suspected by the Fiefguard leadership. After all, many of their late colleagues were now as feed for the worms outside Balasthea, a miscalculation that had moved the margrave to fevered scheming—even more so with last night’s breaching of Arbel’s gates. Tense discourse was had before the break of dawn, during which was made most apparent the margrave’s mind: he meant to steal away to the viscounty of Tallien, whilst leaving the city’s defenders to stall for time. Such explained the securing of a slave Nafíl for this very purpose.

Thus did they bat not an eye when Theodor revealed to them the margrave’s intent for Viola. Only, that selfsame margrave was now dead—a development the Östbergs opted to obscure, as airing the lord’s untimely death now

would at once damn the defenders to admitting defeat, most certainly.

Not that any oath bound the Östbergs to this battle. Hardly so; they were sellswords, after all. Coin was their chief concern. Were Arbel to fall, they had only to pack up and pelt away into the sunset, unchided and unchallenged. The margrave had known as much; little wonder why his desperation was so doubled in leashing them to the fray.

Why stay, then? Simple: it was Sigmund, a *Zaharte hand*, that had hewn the margrave. Should such a detail come to light, doubtless the siblings would shoulder the heavy blame. Not on pain of death, perhaps, but the stigma would surely spell the end of the Zaharte Battalion.

Hence was the free company yet coiled to this conflict, with the Östbergs intent on dressing the margrave's death as mere "collateral damage" once the battle was done with. But a silver lining loomed, just as Theodor had said. An opportunity in this pale plight, promising furtherance for one precious fancy: the siblings' secret ambition.

"A fief, all to our own," Theodor thought aloud wistfully. "You really think we've the hand for such a gamble, Sis?"

"We'll know once all the cards are laid," answered the other Östberg. "But this, I can say: the reward is well-worth the wager."

Within her words could be felt the fire of determination. In recalling the courses trod to reach to this moment, the sister steeled anew her resolve.

Four daughters. Five sons. Such was the issue of their father. And such was Viola's and Theodor's misfortune, to be the youngest of them all, of a baron-house bereft of both

land and leverage. A bubble of a family threatening to burst—most lords so ill-starred ever drown themselves in dragging their households from the gaping maws of irrelevance and ruin. The Baron Östberg was no different. Of his many children, it was his eldest sons who earned a reflection in his cold eyes, for it was from amongst them that their father resolved to one day select as the house's next head.

Why, not even as pawns for political marriage could the two siblings have served. Above them stood no less than seven other brothers and sisters, each as capable as they were comely. And plenty besides: the baron thought it enough to pour into them all his plans and leave his last two to while their days away.

So it was that Viola and Theodor were conferred the comfort of neither parental faith nor fondness, but merely food, clothes, and shelter. Shunned they were not, no. Only, they had no purpose imparted to them, no place in the great Östberg enterprise.

Not even to the occasional manor banquet or soirée were they welcomed. Such were stages wherein House Östberg could break bread and bond with the other nobility, not some playground for urchins of ill-promise, no, no, not at all.

And so would the two pretend their own party. Whilst their elder brothers mingled with noble damsels over wine and witticisms, little Viola and Theodor instead tucked themselves away to the kitchen corner. There they mingled like mice, just the two of them, prattling on about the day's happenings over a saucer of assorted cheeses and nuts.

A humble mockery. But for them, a happy memory.

Little Viola and little Theodor.

Childish cheeks chock-full of peanuts and pistachios.

Sister and brother, smiling and beaming in whole harmony.

Their brothers plied the sword on the daily, as well, with instructors watching closely anear. And from the corridor or behind a cracked door could oft be found the two siblings sneaking a peek, their eyes filled with wonder and willingness to learn the same craft.

Thus one day, with twigs picked from near the wood, they attempted to mimick their brothers' mettle, and just as they had thought, it was a merry activity, indeed. From noon till eventide did they swing and swashbuckle, panting and puffing, their twigs ever twirling and their sunny smiles never setting.

Soon enough, they sought the manor-soldiery's attention, that their playful practice might be minded. The soldiers humoured them, and when time allowed, even taught the siblings some tricks of the martial trade. Only, the grunts wielded spears, not swords. But no matter. To the little ones, lessons of the spear were no less splendid.

Days absolutely singing with smiles. So long as the two were together. So long as the two had one another.

Still, they were children, yearning no less than the next child for the love of their parents. Hence whensoever their father flickered naught but callous eyes at them, little Viola and Theodor could but quail, lonely and sorrowful.

Children, neither neglected nor loved. A tragedy, all the same.

And one that saw no alleviation, even with the passing of many seasons. Thus did they chance a change by their own hands: soon after Theodor's fifteenth birthday and his reception at the Roun of Orisons, the siblings quit the Östberg manor and made off into the wide open world. Their destination: the mercenary guilds.

Not that the doors of the knightly Orders were shut to them. No. Such a choice they eschewed. The sellsword's life was more their mind. To fare far away from family and father alike. To forge their own way, together and only together. This was their solemn resolve.

A resolve their father ill-repudiated. Oh, but of course. He cared not. Why, it was two fewer burdens upon his strained shoulders. Thus was silent consent given, to go wheresoever and do whatsoever they pleased.

And so from that day till this did the Östberg siblings scratch and scour their way through a world of coin and conflict. With spears of splendour and magicks of might, they swiftly became a household name. And before long, they even found themselves commanders to their very own band of mercenaries, richly regarded, known far and wide to the very fringes of Londosius.

Perhaps far enough to reach their father's ears. Or, perhaps not. True enough, not since the day of their departure have the two heard from the baron.

An annoyance this proved to the pair. But just an annoyance. Though more so for Viola. Suppose they had wanted to surprise their father; tease out some regret from that mirthless man. Even then, they would have confessed the fancy to be but faint and half-humoured. Why, if surprise was to be had, it was on the part of the siblings themselves.

Here they were, already decorated and accomplished, and *still* not a single word from the baron? How busied he must be. How buried in bolstering the Östberg tree. How oblivious to aught beyond the bounds of his corner of the world. Of this, the siblings were reminded anew.

Suppose this, then. Viola and Theodor, masters to a new *fief*, founders to a new and ennobled *family*. What sayest thou, oh cold father? Art thine uncherished children now worth thy warmth?

A jest, of course. One exchanged many a time between the two siblings. A jest and a dream, never to fruit beyond a fantasy. But now was that fruit afore their very eyes, real and ready to ripen, as if nurtured by the heavenly hand of Yoná Herself.

The Margrave Aaron Ström left behind nary a child of his own. This past year saw the last breath of his beloved, and not since has he thought to welcome in a new wife. Why, he was himself the sole scion of his line, brotherless and sisterless. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, always had he felt it his duty to dam the flood of Nafílim, and sure enough, to this very purpose had he spent all his days, as though his very pride were pennoned upon the spears of his men.

“The margrave’ll be snug in his coffin soon enough, but with not one bloodkin alive, his will be a lonely funeral,” Viola explained. Her voice was low, her conviction clear. “This land of his, however... it’ll all be fair game.”

“Fair game, sure, but will *we* have a seat at the contest? We’re but witnesses to the crime, after all. Who’s to say Central’s hawks won’t swoop in and hand off this land to

some other silver-spoon? Or snatch the reins themselves, for that matter?”

Theodor’s doubts were most warranted. But his sister had a ready answer.

“Haven’t you heard? The Mareschal Emilie Valenius—she herself was given a fief, one once ruled by a viscount, perverted and now punished. A land lost of its lord; a lord whose son the mareschal was once set to wed,” she said at length, still low of volume. “That was reason enough for Central to tie the bow on her boon... curious, given that she’s met the villain viscount not once.”

Theodor’s brows bent up. “G... ‘given’, you say? A whole fief?”

Ah, yes—Emilie Valenius. The Lady of the Levinblade, a Londosian hero-dame next only to Estelle Tiselius herself. Famed for being first amongst all in history to serve as both mareschal to an Order and mistress to her own house. But that such history hid behind the brilliance came as news to the Zaharte vice-captain’s ears.

“Theodor. Central’s talons grow bloodier by the day. The lions of Londosius hunt more hungrily than ever before. This kingdom craves for heroes; ones mighty enough to man its chariots. Heroes like Emilie Valenius—like *us*,” Viola expounded. A clear-cut explanation for her brother... and for herself, an affirmation of her dearest ambition. “We’re not wanting of feats and fame, are we?” she continued. “The Östberg siblings, twin spearheads of the Zaharte Battalion, renowned in *all the realm*. A princely précis, wouldn’t you say?”

“I would... sure,” Theodor nodded.

“What’s more, the Mareschal Valenius is cut from the same cloth as we,” added Viola. “A child of a troveless, landless baron, of a family with no future.”

“An ending, just as we are...” her brother thought aloud, rubbing his chin. “...Quite the compelling case, I’ll admit. And a gamble truly worth our wager, as you’ve said.”

Thus were sibling minds as one again. To assay the summit with sword and steeled ambition—such was the only constant in this cauldron of conflict. Thus should this truly be a treasure chest of a chance, then they had but to reach and wrest it for themselves.

“I suppose that’s why you’ve skipped on the margrave’s hostage scheme?” Theodor asked, to which Viola nodded.

Ström—a margravate now without a margrave. A land now listing to its own doom. And the ones to inherit the late lord’s will? The heroes to hew the foreign harriers? A sellsword sister and her brother, endlings to an ennobled line. Truly the stuff of legends, given no small substance by their preceding repute.

But one key was missing: a vaunted victory.

A victory of arms, a victory of virtue. Not by succumbing to vices, by claiming triumph through treating with the enemy on threat of disthroating helpless hostages, would Central have fancied the siblings worthy of a fief. And so did the siblings *need* this battle, and they needed it *won*—cleanly, and without question.

“We’ll quit the manor and muster straightway at the camp,” said Viola. “No doubt the rush’ll rouse the enemy’s ears, but all the better: we’ll welcome them into our den... and there rip them to pieces.”

All told, the Zaharte captain saw much worth yet in the margrave's former plans. The concentration camp certainly was defensible, thick-walled as it was. And an irresistible lure besides, rife with the stench of Nafílim captives too tempting to the enemy's noses. They would come, sooner or later. And if later, then all the better. Viola meant to use every afforded minute in perfecting her trap.

"Our most prized prey will be the ungraced himself," the Zaharte captain concluded. "His is the keenest nose of them all—and the one most temptable. Once in our midst, Östberg spears shall drink deep of Rolf Buckmann's blood."

And be as pikes to present his traitorous head. Such was the vision seen in Viola's eyes as her brother looked intently back. He then nodded fully, now on deck with his sister's determination. Nay, *their* determination.

Till there, within earshot—a third voice, murmuring.

"Rolf... Buckmann...?"

Standing at the doorway was the sister to that very name.



Viola very nearly clucked her tongue, stung anew by the brigadier's insistent presence.

The margrave himself had deemed this dame a wildcard, a worry the Zaharte captain, too, came to share. Indeed, Felicia's plight perhaps struck a mite too close to

home for Viola: Theodor was her constant companion, a brother for whom she brooked no replacement... but were he to turn traitor as Rolf the renegade had, what would become of *her* own heart? *Her* own conduct? The captain could scarce imagine, and that was precisely why she saw in the brigadier a bomb waiting to blow at the slightest spark.

Siren-bells were now blaring in her head, but to stay the dame from sniffing out any foulness afoot, Viola kept her tense visage turned away from the doorway.

“His name sounds a secret upon your lips,” Felicia remarked, walking slowly in. “Why?”

“W-Why? Well, he’s er, he’s... he’s been sighted, Brigadier—on the other side, I fear,” Theodor relented, stammering as he saw to the side his sister racing through a thousand thoughts. Something *must* be done about this dame. But what? Viola was yet concerned that in Felicia there burnt some secret fire, a yearning to break her Londosian bonds and join her brother in his betrayal.

Such must not come to pass. This sister of Rolf—she must be caged off. Far from the battlefield. Far from her brother.

“Then... then pray let me see him, if he’s there, as you say,” Felicia earnestly entreated. “He’ll lend ear to me. I know he will.”

An amicable reconciliation? Through discourse? Damned words upon the Östbergs’ ears. They rather desired Rolf Buckmann’s very death—nay, they *needed* it.

“His Excellency said it himself ereyesterday, did he not?” Viola reminded the dame, turning at last to meet her ruby eyes. “I’m afraid parleying is off the table, Brigadier.”

Felicia glanced about the great hall. “And where might he be, the lord?”

“He’s awayed to safety,” answered Viola, “but not before trusting all command to me.”

At once, Felicia’s gaze flashed with urgency. “Th-then allow me in the next battle! I’ll find my brother, for certain! And persuade his surrender! He’ll heed me! He will!”

What ill.

Viola veritably grinded her teeth, if only in her heart. Parleying was impossible, a truth aired with all clarity, and *still* this foe-sister insisted upon the contrary. More and more she seemed steeped in self-deception, a damsel in denial, coursed away from all common sense.

“Brigadier,” Viola began firmly. “That brother of yours has sore-scorned both Crown and kinsmen, choosing instead to walk the traitor’s way—for why we can never know. And in bringing to bear the full brunt of his fearsome prowess has he made culled and cornered curs of the once-proud Fiefguard. Who with right mind, then, should reckon he surrender when such a *storm* it is he rides against us?”

Strained silence was Felicia’s only answer. Her gaze was turned away. What emotion moiled in them was beyond the present ken of the Östbergs.

“Brigadier?” pressed Viola, perturbed by the quietude.

After a stifling moment, “...If he’ll not surrender, then I will *still* that storm of his... and leash him back with all limbs bound, if need be.”

Low was her voice. Uncharacteristically so. Freshly apparent to the Östbergs' eyes was something... *dark*, deep within the depths of the dame. A shade in the shadows, roused wrath by some word uttered in the exchange just now. But which word, which phrase exactly, Viola knew not.

There was no mistaking it, then. Fraught as a field of thorns, this Felicia, a thought the Östberg sister was reminded of anew.

"You look to unleash a storm of your own, Brigadier. But even an errant breeze can dare to decide this delicate battle," said Viola. "The whole of Ström hangs by a thread. Much succour you'll serve by but sitting still. And I beseech that you do."

"I'll not be a burden. Not in battle, not in aught," Felicia resisted. "I mean only to meet my brother."

This dame was having none of it. Not of reason, of restraint. Such stubbornness seemed to have pushed the Zaharte captain over some cliff, for her next utterance, while quiet, grated with annoyance:

"...If words shall still you not, then perhaps the lock and chain might."

"You fancy yourself a keymaster like the margrave, Captain?" Felicia snapped back, undeterred. "Martial command was what's trusted to you, not provincial rule. So unless you mean to wield the Excellency's sceptre behind his back, I will do as I please."

Now was Viola herself strained with silence. And indeed the whole of the great hall's air. Theodor stood petrified, sweat shining fresh upon his forehead. Little need be said as to what havock his sister could wreak, given enough...

persuasion. But a face her was no less than a dame brigadier of the Order, a champion of matching mettle. Such power and authority it was that invested these two, yet they seemed more keen to bicker like irritable babes than battle the foes now affrighting the fief-burgh.

For her part, the Östberg sister was no less urged by the same imperative. The grand plan was nearly in play, the pieces all set to pounce. But barring their way: this mulish maiden of the Order. Not more than twenty winters has she lived, and already was she proving more a handful than hot iron.

Stilling her own storm within her bosom, Viola yielded a deep breath and broached the most pressing matter.

“...Then allow me this, Brigadier: I trust you’ve not the same mind as Rolf Buckmann’s, yes? To fly the same flag as his? To curse the good name of Londosius, all that you might stand again by your brother’s side?”

“Do you take me for some fawning pup?” Felicia asked back, slightly narrowing her eyes. “My bumbling brother’s the one at fault here. Sisterly duty demands not that I echo his mistakes, but that I put them to rights.”

Viola remained quiet against the cutting answer, calming herself and contemplating in the meanwhile. So bull-like a brigadier would ill-brook a ban from the battlefield. Indeed, force her away and she would force herself back in all the more doggedly, and there destroy all their dearest efforts.

No choice, then. Bring her in, why not? Let her drink deep the battle-air to her heart’s content—but from the far back, where would never be found any sight of Rolf

Buckmann. Such was Viola's new reasoning, which she put to task at once.

"...Very well, then," she relented, rising out of her thoughts. "The battle moves to the concentration camp. There shall we muster defences against the enemy's forthcoming advance. You have my permission to participate, but not at the frontlines—the rearguard is your place and *only* place. Is that clear, Brigadier?"

"'Tis indeed," answered Felicia. "My thanks, Captain." Bowing quickly, she turned heel and headed to the corridor. The Östbergs watched on with nary a word, but then found the brigadier stopping asudden under the doorway. To them she then turned her face, and with a sidelong look, gave them their warning: "Worry not. I'll churn up no trouble of my own... but for any shadows you send to haunt my steps."

"...The thought never crossed my mind."

Verily, for by now, Viola sooner fancied snuffing out the dame altogether than babysitting her from afar. But this Felicia purportedly shared intimate rapport with the Lady Valenius, and was herself set to be the next head of House Buckmann; though her brother's betrayal might usher in some foulness to her family, Felicia's was an ire too ill to earn yet.

A tightrope it was that the Östbergs were balanced on. Their dreams, their hopes, all laid at the far end; not now could they afford to fall off, nor invite any sparks that might ignite their precarious purchase. And though Felicia was proving the fire-wind of their fears, not by their hand could she be hushed or hewn. Seeing the brigadier disappear into the corridor, they found themselves begrudgingly content

with having leashed her to some lonely corner of the battlefield.

†

A muffled thud sounded—the shutting of the manor’s main entrance, signalling the brigadier’s full absence. Viola sighed audibly. To his tired sister did Theodor then speak.

“Well. A pleasant little princess, wasn’t she?”

“Pain applauds that ‘pleasantness’ of hers,” Viola hissed.

“I’d say, you had the right of it, though: that Rolf Buckmann bloke doesn’t seem the sort to surrender,” Theodor remarked, earning a nod from his sister.

Dealing with the dame as they did was far from ideal, but better to nip a risk at the bud than after its bloom. Such was the siblings’ reasoning.

Rolf Buckmann—it was his head on a pike they wanted, not his surrender. But that was fine and well, for just as Theodor had concluded, almost certainly would the ungraced traitor not be surrendering any time soon, even when so sued by his very own sister.

Though suppose such a meeting was the hand dealt, one precipitating a stalemate, for certain. Felicia, in all her magicked mightiness, would bring her brother to heel, just as promised. Hardly the unsought scenario, in fact, as the feat will have been performed under Viola’s command, and

hence would the Zaharte name earn yet another lustre. Indeed, more and more the situation sounded less fraught than first espied.

“But I admit, the thought of the brigadier jumping to her brother’s ship has me shivering in my boots a little. Even if she seemed unwilling,” Theodor continued.

“Then she’ll burn along with that precious ship of hers. A fitting pyre for a perfidious witch,” Viola remarked coldly. “Justice abets our banner; none shall bat an eye should we lay the torch.”

Yet no torch should be needed; that the brigadier would follow her brother was a fool’s fancy. *‘My bumbling brother’s the one at fault here’* were her own words, and in Viola’s ears, they had nary a note of deception in them. Never, then, should she so much as stain a standard of Londosius—not according to the Zaharte captain’s keen ken, anyway.

“Preferable she never meets her brother, all told. Though if meet they do, he’ll not give in—not even to his own sister. And if she does her ‘sisterly duty’, then all the better: Rolf Buckmann shall be brought before us, with Zaharte claiming the catch. But if our brigadier joins her brother, then it’s the shared grave that awaits them,” Viola explained at length. “All cases covered—our way is open, Theodor.”

“Well... there is *one* you left out,” said her brother. “The case of the brother vanquishing his sister.”

Quite the fair point.

Rolf was reckoned to be feeble and fangless in battle. Yet what flood was it that he single-handedly dammed and diverted into flight? Why, one by the twin names of Ulrik

and Sigmund. Could the Dame Brigadier Felicia Buckmann bring a mightier challenge? Perhaps not. Perhaps she would be undone by the blade of her own bloodkin.

And if so, it would be with the sibling spears of the Östbergs that Rolf would next vie.

“Why, Theodor,” Viola cooed, curling up her lips. “Is that not the best case of them all?”

Hers was a moon of a smile, crescent and crimson-rouged, as though she had found the next prey for her feast.

And contrary to the increasing rays of the morning, a great curtain was now closing upon this battle for Arbel. A bloodfest of a fray, muddled in the myriad motives of its contenders.



The sun was risen above Arbel. Our braves buzzed and bustled with preparations as we were all mustered within a market square at the fief-burgh’s north end. The citizenry here seemed long-evacuated; the townscape sat eerily still under morrowing rays.

Not long before were we joined by Volker and his contingent after their harrying of the east gates. Reunited now as we were, what remained was to reorganise and rearm ourselves for the principal push towards the margrave’s manor. Only...

“A mis’ry to admit, but no other way can I see: the sire of this city seeks flight... if not yet has he taken wing,” Volker concluded, slightly scowling at a map of Arbel splayed upon a vacant stall. A fortunate find, procured by his braves from a local bibliotheca whilst en route to our position. But that seemed where their—and our—luck ran dry. Other leaders, too, were present for the meeting. Their faces were no less furrowed.

“A pain without prevention...” Lise remarked without spirit.

Painful, indeed, to let slip the margrave from our reach. With backing from Central has House Ström presided over these lands for many generations. Such history was a harrier to us: even were we to capture this fief-burgh, so long as the margrave yet drew breath—whether in hiding or hale in the home of some other lord—ours would prove only a vain victory.

Aaron Ström, lord of a land wrenched away by Rolf the renegade and his horde of Nafílim... He has but to bellow and embellish this injustice, and droves would fast flock under his flag, and thence engulf us with numbers beyond our answering.

Yet Lise scried correctly another thorny truth: we had not the power to prevent such a scenario. Arbel was too big a fief-burgh, its walls too long, its gates too many. Superior to its defenders’ may be our number, but to *surround* the city itself? Would that our current count were manyfold more for such a snare, but alas. Should the margrave risk an escape, then, he would find it an easy flight.

Guessing his routes out of the city and waylaying them each was certainly actionable, but that would entail another

splitting of our forces. A sour proposition, made rancid by the look of last night's battle. There did the Fiefguard fight with newfound friends, whose mettle we'd yet to measure in full. Unreckoned risks, unsought surprises; we could but abandon the chase.

The taking of the fief-burgh, then, seemed our most requiting course, despite its danger. Thus did we devote ourselves to this very purpose. Let the margrave run, but in his absence, capture the cruces of his city and neutralise the remnant Fiefguard—if all fares to plan, Arbel, and indeed all of Ström, shall be ours... for a tenuous while, at least.

“Unfain be the Fiefguard to make a barricade of their garrison,” Volker uttered before turning to me. “Rolf. This stands true yet? Or?”

“It does,” I answered. “The Fiefguard garrison might be a military facility, but it is hardly a fastness. Mere offices make for poor protection, you see.”

To this, the war-chief exhaled thoughtfully before looking back to the map. “Then that leaves but one...” he said. A finger of his next tapped upon a particular spot on the parchment. All eyes followed. All heads nodded.

The concentration camp—one of Arbel's cores we'd been well-set on capturing. Innocents were interned there: friends, family, fellow kin. We'd thought to liberate them as soon as the city fell... but if the Fiefguard meant to make their last stand there in that very camp, then we had no choice but to follow and fight, even at peril to the prisoners within.

“Walls, surrounding ev'ry side...” Volker muttered on, arms folded, “...and a lone gate as its mouth.”

True to its purpose, the concentration camp was completely palisaded. It had many gates, to be sure, but only the frontmost of them was of any substantial size. All the others were side doors and entrances, really, through none of which can two persons pass abreast. Indeed, a layout full-keen on keeping prisoners in—but what of keeping enemies *out*? Not so on paper, but perhaps in practice; a gamble the Fiefguard seemed quite keen on.

Though that made our plight no less precarious. The side gates would avail us little; our only course, then, was to crash right into the front gate and meet the Fiefguard at their fiercest.

“A word, if I may,” spoke a Staffelhaupt, hand raised, at whom Volker nodded. “Many of our kin are kept captive in the camp—nay, in all the city itself. Though I fear it... might the Men make hostages of them?”

“Mm... This, too, have I reckon’d, that our enemy should fain make demands than risk resistance. But as yet, none have reach’d my ears,” answered Volker, before looking to Lise. “What of yours, Edelfräulein?”

A shake of the head. “Not one chirp.”

Resorting to hostage-taking indeed counted amongst the few paths left to our foe. Yet just as revealed by Volker and Lise, it remained unventured to this moment.

“But absent such demands... what of injury? To our captive kin? They will yet quail in their cages amidst all the combat to come; won’t our enemy put them to the sword in some fit of desperation?”

The Staffelhaupt’s voice listed uneasily, yet his face had the look of determination. Doubtless his bosom both

brimmed with worry for the captives and burnt with a dream to see them all freed. Thus I raised my own hand and spoke firmly, intent upon settling the uncertainty:

“A word, if I may.”

To which Lise gave a puzzled look. “Courteous for a commander, aren’t you?”

Embarrassed, I let fall my hand. Mimicking the Staffelhaupt was, in fact, a courtesy on my part, albeit one as vain as it was a vice: cautious of conduct though I’d been thus far that I might earn recognition from my new comrades, it seemed my awkward ways weren’t doing me any favours.

Clearing my throat, I tried once more. “...I say, his concern hits the mark: our enemies make no demands now, but corner them enough, and they might soon see the appeal of holding innocents at swordpoint.”

Words bitter upon everyone’s ears. Going by the gravity in their collective regard, it was clear this Staffelhaupt was hardly alone in worrying after the captives.

“What’s more, these Men’ve made mice of themselves, huddled in their last hole,” I continued. “If past battles have taught us aught, it is that fraught footmen seek solace above all. But allowed none, they *will* find it where they can—even from the death-wails of innocents, as though to crave companions on their way to hell.”

Grim grimaces from all around. A natural response. Grief, not gaiety, would be ours to bear if the trophies of our triumph were the corpses of the very souls we sought to save.

“Then... then what be our hand in this ill game?” asked the Staffelhaupt. Any unease he had before now simmered with urgency. My guess: one amongst the interned was most intimate to him.

“A swift one,” I answered. “We move as a gale. Blitz the gates, speed a squad into the bastille; once inside, they will secure and extract the captives, each and every one.”

The concentration camp was none too complex. It had but three buildings of note: a bastille, a watchtower, and a warden-house. In the first were the captives kept, and come the final clash, the turnkeys on duty would likely all be deployed to dam our offence. *This* was the moment, the prime opportunity to pierce the chaos and collect the unguarded captives.

“Simple, yet sound,” reckoned Volker. “But that begs the question: to whom falls the task?”

“Those with mettle enough unaided—the standalone soldier,” was my answer, to which everyone began exchanging looks, as though to seek out the candidates for the undertaking.

In the midst of all the measuring, one voice spoke out. “Rolf has my vote. For his mettle can I vouch.” The words of an intermediate commander, himself a participant in the northern offensive this past night.

“But not for *mine*, hmm?” the jarl-daughter poked, lips pouting. “‘Lise’s mettle is unmatched’; whose often words were those, I wonder?”

A mere jape, of course, but not to the commander’s ears, supposedly. “N-nay, Fräulein, yours be mighty enough, for true...”

“Well? What think you all?” Volker asked the other leaders. Silence gripped the group once more, till one amongst them stepped forth.

“Rolf’s is a sword swift and true,” he said. “This have I seen. And so do I measure him... a Man worthy of our trust.”

...“Trust”.

For me. A *Man*. Their erstwhile enemy.

Yet none uttered a wisp of dissent. Some even nodded.

“You have their hopes, Rolf,” remarked Volker.

“And I will answer them,” I returned. “Only, you all trust to me more than is due—I can’t go it alone. A few under my wing should well-suffice; Man that I am, I fear the sight of me will sooner cow the captives than comfort them.”

“Mete words. The assignments be mine to make, then,” the war-chief agreed, at once drawing his attention down to a muster roll. At his side was Lise, who gave me a glance of some urgency.

“One more matter, Rolf,” she said. “On the sellswords, if you will.”

“Right,” I nodded. Then, standing before the leaders, I raised my voice. “Braves all, listen close! The margrave has turned to mercenaries, that his diminished men might be bolstered. And by the look of the last battle, already are they arrived and ready to fight. I’ve seen for myself their symbol—we count amongst our foes now the Zaharte Battalion.”

Intelligence delivered, with eyes looking all through the leaders'. They deserved to know every detail... it might very well save them. Such was the merciless mettle of our new enemies.

“‘Zaharte’?” echoed another Staffelhaupt. “A name I have heard. Two siblings lead that legion. A deadly duo, if memory serves—the sister, more so.”

In the course of his words did his face increasingly pale with apprehension. The Zaharte name, the Östberg brand—both were infamous even to the Nafílim, evidently.

“It serves well. But strength attracts strength; *all* of the Zaharte fighters are a force to be reckoned with,” I confirmed. “They sport arms and armour no Fiefguardsman wears. Easy foes to find, but not to fell. Keep your wits whetted, everyone!”

“Face them always with greater numbers! Alone, and only death will be your reward!” Lise chimed in. “Indeed, ‘number’ be our key advantage; use it, sustain it, and stay alive! Let’s not greet our captured kin as corpses!”

A tide of nods for the jarl-daughter’s words. Volker, too, seemed no less agreed.

“Worthy of mention are the mercenaries’ leadership,” I added. “They are the deadliest of them all, and—”

“Enemy!”

Ears perked. Eyes flashed.

“Enemy sighted! In our vicinity!”

Interrupting was a messenger brave as he broke into our gathering. Tension and shock shot through us all at once.

“They have sprung...!?” Volker said with clenched teeth. Truly an ill upheaval; at this stage in the battle, the concentration camp should’ve proven the best bastion for our foes. But to *ambush* us, instead? I glowered at the very thought, as did Volker as he growled on, “Right under our noses...!”

Yet the messenger only shook his head. “N-nay, Chief! The enemy... something’s amiss...!”



An anguished voice vaulted through Arbel’s air as we rushed to the square’s corridor. Nearing the source, we came upon confounded braves all bunched in a crowd, encircling a single, squatting Man. In his arms: a boy Nafíl, limp as sodden rope and steeped in blood besides.

“Oi! Spare ‘im some mendin’ magicks already, will ya!? ‘E’s fast fadin’, for shite’s sake!!” screamed the Man, his face full-red and flooded with tears and snot. “L-look at ‘im! A boy! Jus’ a li’l boy!! *Uooooaaa—ah!!* Save ‘im, damn you! *Save ‘im!!*”

Bandaging the boy’s bosom were crude strips of cloth. Though the bleeding beneath seemed ceased, his breaths wheezed on like a failing wind. No physician was on hand, yet all eyes knew: this young one was not long for this world.

Lise turned at once to the nearby braves. “Where’s the *lǣce!*?”

“Already sent for!” answered one amongst them. “Any moment now till he’s come! Barbers withal!”

“Damn it! Damn it all!!” the Man howled on, glancing desperately about. “Quit gand’rin’ an’ get movin’, you wankers! Come on!! The boy’s one o’ you, innit!? One o’ you!!”

Pained and pitiable were his screaming pleas, yet none of the braves dared answer them. They stood perplexed—petrified, even, struck to stillness by the unsettling scene. As for myself, sheer shock had rooted me in place; I’d ill-discerned it at first, seeing him so swollen and drenched with tears, but I indeed knew this Man’s face—I knew his *sword*.

It was Sigmund.

A soldier of fortune... and a sword of Zaharte.

Soon enough, in the midst of his blustering screams, the press of braves made way as through them flew the *lǣce* and a team of barber-surgeons. Straightway, they surrounded the Man and the boy before incanting mending magicks unto the latter and tending to his injury.

A fraught moment followed as we watched in wonder and worry. In its course, Lise approached the huddled healers. “How fares he?” she asked, soft but strained.

“The wound eludes his vitals,” revealed a barber. “He may live yet.”

Immediately, the crowd sighed a chorus of relief. Through the entire ordeal was Sigmund, keeping a fevered vigil over the boy. A look at him, and I understood at once:

This Man was no enemy of ours.

::

“Wot? That mutton-pated margrave? I rived ‘im right open, I did.”

Sigmund’s words, irreverent as they were revelatory.

The boy’d been treated and brought away to the beds, after which we pressed this Zaharte swordsman as to his puzzle of a predicament. There he divulged his flight from his fellow sellswords and the plight that precipitated it. It was then that we so learnt of the margrave’s fate: the lord of Ström, felled by none other than Sigmund himself.

A great rustle was roused from all within earshot. Of course we were shocked. None could’ve anticipated so untimely a death of the enemy commander-in-chief. And yet here we were.

“Rived him, and what then?” Lise further pressed the swordsman. “Did he give up the ghost? Had you time to check, even?”

A doubt well-warranted. By Sigmund’s words, he’d whisked away the boy from the manor right after unmaking the margrave. Queerly convenient upon the ears, I’ll admit. But more than aught, we were much wary at the thought of

revising our strategy on account of some unconfirmed development.

“Hah!” Sigmund snorted, shaking his head. “No need. That berk o’ a lord—’e’s belly up proper, ‘e is.”

Such he insisted. Though strangely enough, I found myself rather convinced. Sigmund’s sword was as a gashing bear claw, a goring bull horn—strength I’d strived against in the flesh, and thus well-knew the measure of. And if indeed such strength girded the stroke against the margrave, then it was as Sigmund said: the lord was dead. Gruesomely so.

The proverbial head we’d so sought to hew, then, was already nipped from its neck.

“And yet... still the Fiefguard stir.”

Another doubt, now from one of our Staffelhäupter, revealing raw the rub of this situation: our commanderless foe was yet fain to fight. No demands were made, no safe surrender beseeched, though lost of lord they may be. The scouts’ reports corroborated the same: the enemies were all of them mustering at the concentration camp, with banners of battle billowing more defiantly than ever... Passing strange, indeed.

“Yea—this battle’s ‘ad the margrave’s trousers right tricklin’, see,” explained Sigmund. “So, ‘e thought to shog ‘is arse out o’ the city, an’ left Viola an’ them to lap up the dog’s dinner, ‘e did.”

“...Escape was his scheme all along,” hissed another Staffelhaupt.

If Sigmund’s account rang true, then so, too, did our reading of the margrave’s mind. The dots lined up at last: in

meaning to flee did he transfer command of his men to Viola, captain of the very band of mercenaries he'd hired.

"Then it's Viola Östberg who holds the Fiefguard's reins now, is it? A spear-devout, and quite the commander besides, I hear—our foul luck to lock horns with her..." I said at length, all the while glaring at Sigmund, pressing him for more details. Yet he seemed as helpful as a feral hound, turning the other way with a rather bothered bend in his brows.

"Hemph," he scoffed. "Yea, 'er spear's somethin' else, all right. But 'ow good a commander, you ask? Bugger'd if I know. Fightin's me bread an' butter; giz coin an' combat, an I'm a 'appy camper, ya get me?"

"How now!" cried a Staffelhaupt. "Awful lack-minded for a lacquey of hers, aren't you?"

"Oi, piss off, yea? Can't know if I can't be arsed," Sigmund barked back, scowling. "But even if I did, I ain't 'bout to be some rat, know wot I mean?"

A lone swordsman of a foe, flying into our midst, only to proclaim his taking of his client-commander's very life—words and deeds too wild for our wits. Yet that was precisely the skein presented before us. And as we racked our brains as to how best to untangle it, Volker stepped forth and addressed a pouting Sigmund.

"A hyaena you are, then, parted from the pack," the war-chief reckoned of the mercenary. "Yet one who refuses to 'rat them out', as your kin might say. You live by some code, Man?"

"'Code'? Wot, I reeks o' chivalry to ya, ah? Bloody 'ell," was Sigmund's bitter answer, earning a reasoned murmur

from one amongst our lot:

“...But suppose we squeezed a song out of this canary. What stops him from lacing his lyrics with lies?”

Exactly so.

Had Sigmund coughed up aught and all that our ears coveted, who, then, could corroborate his words? Or soothe our suspicions for some foul ploy played by our foe? We could ill-afford to exercise compassion in place of caution—not in this situation, at least. Only, I yet believed Sigmund innocent of our scepticism.

“For shite’s sake—I’m no knight, but I ain’t a bloody knave, either, mate.”

Of course not. Sigmund had been spilling the truth all along. His screams, his tears—no knave could be moved to such haunting emotion, after all. And surely we’d given him the succour he so sought; what reason had he to deceive us in return?

“Song or silence, we keep our course,” Volker said, resolved. “Our foe bears a new head: the pair’d pates of the Östbergs. We have but to sculpt our plans as appropriate.”

“Volker’s right,” agreed Lise. “Attack the camp, free the captives, crush the enemy—our way remains unbent.”

Hearing the two’s words, I guessed that they’ve scried in Sigmund the same as I had. It was then that Lise turned full to the Man himself.

“Now—one last nail to drive in,” she said, sighing and arms akimbo.

“You best watch that mallet o’ yours, Missus. Ya hear!?” Sigmund hissed, pointing at her. “I brought the brat ‘ere to save ‘im, not surrender meself to you lot, yea?”

The swordsman’s insolence was yet undiminished. In him lingered not an iota of awe or unease, even stood as he was in the midst of an enemy camp.

“Then ‘tis the ball and chain for you, *Mister*,” Lise bit back, before sighing again. “That said, your situation deserves our hospitality than hostility, I admit...”

“Then be hospit’ble-like an’ giz some grub, will ya?” Sigmund demanded, before turning sharp eyes in my direction. “A full stummy brews back the blood, it does.”

That stare of his stabbed with ire, rousing irritation from some amongst us. Paying it little mind, I ventured a guess as to his seething attitude.

“You mean the blood I hewed from your cheek?”

“*Hmph*, me cheek—wot else, you wank-wit!?” he cried, as though insulted. “Look ‘ere, ey! *Scraped* me skin what’s all ya did! But if ya wants to *hew me*, you’d better cut a li’l more deep-like next time, yea? Down through me very *bones!*”

...“My very bones.”

In spite of his gruffness, this Man could air some rather inspiring words, I’ll concede. My sword had severed naught but the flesh caging the soul that was “Sigmund”. By that logic does he claim to suffer no wound at all—not till he’s cut free from his flesh. Such was his meaning, his very mind. A fascinating one, at that, well-earning from me an inward nod.

“Intriguing words, Sigmund,” I returned. “I’d ask more of you, if I could.”

“Yea? Then spit.”

“Not now. This waits till the dust’s settled.”

As it should: the battle before us demanded our full attention, all the more so now that the gameboard was shuffled anew. Learning more of this wayward Man would have to come later.

“Oh? Well then quit faffin’ an’ get fightin’, why don’t ya? An’ giz some grub while you’re at it! Five plates full, pipin’ ‘ot-like!” the soldier of fortune shouted again, ever irreverent and unrestrained.

— V —

Fire magicks flashed and flew in searing arcs.

Far afield at the verge of my vision broke the barks, the bellows, the drum and boom of battle. Affrighting the air were flares of flame and fumes as our ranks of wiccan wove volley after volley of the Lancea Calōris spell. Their target: the single gate of Arbel's concentration camp.

One concerted cast brought the burning lances bearing down all at once upon the barrier. Brightly billowed the ensuing explosion, spilling splinters of timber and hot bars of iron every which way. The gate was breached at last. Our way was opened.

At high noon had we initiated the attack, our opening move it was to unmake the gate. As it hardly compared to the portcullises of palaces and castles, felling it proved an unfraught affair. With it now gone, all so far was falling into place, but our course should grow only graver from here on, for the passage newly opened was woefully narrow—too narrow, in fact, to have the whole of our forces flood through. Grievous, given our primary advantage laid in our superior numbers.

But we'd not the luxury of choice. This was the only way in whereupon could be fielded any number worth fearing. And within the camp festered the Fiefguard, our very mark, and so long as they did, Arbel would not be brought to its knees.

Laying siege, too, was a lost cause. The hour-sand flowed against us; the Fiefguard had to fall at the soonest, lest we find ourselves besieged in turn by Central's reinforcements, certain to come in days' time.

On and on, I watched the battle from afar, and in pondering our foes did I next contemplate their new commanders as elucidated by Sigmund: the vaunted Viola Östberg, and her brother Theodor besides. The margrave was dead; not without hewing their two Östberg heads would the Fiefguard concede defeat.

The terrible twin spears of Zaharte—our foes, fierce as they were famed. As I thought ahead on confronting them, Volker's command clapped across the air like thunder. Our braves obeyed, straightway cascading into the camp. In attempting to dam the flow, the Fiefguard met them at the smouldering ruins of the gate. A new fray frothed forth. And spotted within the swelling scene: ranks of sellswords, bold and brutish—most certainly the fliers of the Zaharte flag.

"The sellswords are not fled... why?" wondered Lise beside me. "What's their dear wager in this war of ours?"

A forgiven doubt. Neither creed nor coin should yet shackle the Östbergs to this battle—nay, to this very *land*. Their lord client was cut down. None would fault them were they to quit the cause. Yet here they remained, their men swinging and stabbing alongside the Fiefguard.

Was it obligation? The transfer of command, coloured anew as some oath made with the margrave in his final moments? A hard thought; they were the heads of Zaharte, preeminent professionals in their field. Never would they suffer sentimentality nor the severed purse of their recompense.

Then perhaps their hands were forced? Some unseen factor, demanding their mettle be brought to bear in this begrudging battle? ...Or perhaps they were even compromised, this duo? That bending the knee to Londosius' will served their sole recourse out of some secret scandal?

Nay... the reverse seemed as like as not: the siblings, bending over backwards to curry favour from the Crown. The margrave had passed without a proper heir. Reasonable, then, that the Östbergs would crave his cold seat. After all, House Östberg was landless, last I heard—the two should hardly be above snatching Ström for their own.

“A wager worth dying for, is my guess,” I said to Lise. “A dream. An *ambition*. Likely the Östbergs've kept the margrave's death under wraps for their own selfish ends.” Seeing Lise deeper in thought, I turned to her with a proposition. “Suppose we sowed this truth in Fiefguard ears, Lise. What might we reap?”

She shook her head. “Too little, I think. Mere words be our mightiest proof, sooner to sprout as lies in their ears, by this time.”

Lise's right; familiar as I was with the Fiefguard, I could only agree.

The margrave's death should well-serve a tailwind for our momentum, for none else beyond the walls of Redelberne should dare muster men against us by rightful claim to Ström's rule. But such considered only what would follow our triumph, one we must hew from the foes now afore us.

I clenched my fists in silence.

Triumph—over Viola and Theodor? Had we the mettle for it? Had *I*? Sigmund and Ulrik proved enough of a pain; could I lay low their *superiors*, were we to meet?

Almost shuddering at the thought, I glared on at the battle burgeoning about the broken gate. And after a deep breath:

“Our turn now,” I declared.

Lise looked to me and nodded back, stern yet spirited in mien. “Fair winds find you, Rolf. May they find you all!”

Also in her eyes: the five braves gathered behind me. Tasked to our team of six was the securement and extraction of the captives from the bastille. To my comrades I turned, finding their faces tense, yet nodding resolutely at Lise’s words. I then raised my voice.

“Ready yourselves, all! We move!”

And so pounded our feet upon the earth as we sped off into the fray.

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At our arrival, the *mêlée* at the gate had grown to a maelstrom, chaotic and combative. Dismounting our steeds, we dashed into the din, our ears shuddering from the shrieks and shouts of friend and foe alike.

Passing into a pall of palpable heat, our bodies at once broke into sweat. Flecks and flaps of dirt and dust danced

every which way, coating skin and garb in grit and grime. In all directions swished and stung the unceasing sounds of brandished blades. In every second rang and rasped reams of armour as they clashed and clattered against one another. Right afore me: a splash of enemy spears. Right beside me: a surge of allied swords. Both sides, all bunched together in a great crush of cheek-by-jowl combat.

Fallen upon the ground was one Fiefguardsman, the sight of him summarily concealed by a stampede of vying soldiers. And then upon the ears: the sounds of smashed bones and trampled entrails. But muffling them: myriad bellows, blistering and boiling ever more ravidly, filling the air to a vociferous overflow.

The battlefield, hurling in a hellish helter-skelter. Allies and adversaries, together enmeshed in an impenetrable mire.

This was a complete and utter chaos, cut and dried. But also a chaos crafted precisely to plan.

Charge the enemy, irrupt rapidly into their ranks, allow the battlefield to fall into a free-for-all, even should it exact injury from our number. Such was our aim, and for one crucial purpose: the suppression of enemy missiles, magicked or no. Going by the absence of projectiles, the plan had found success. Not that our foe could be blamed. With their numbers so dear and dwindled, the Fiefguard artillerymen could scarce disregard the risk of friendly fire.

Of note was the silencing of wide-blasting spells. From parapets and behind bulwarks could the enemy have blown holes in our ranks with impunity. Such was our greatest fear, and so to have it stricken from the equation was an immense weight off our shoulders.

“Experience pays...” I muttered to myself as I led my team through the thick of battle. Indeed, the struggles of commanding the battlements of Balasthea were bearing much fruit here. So much so that I almost pitied the Fiefguard. To witness the fall of the walls of my charge was a former fear to me, one now full-lived by my present foes.

“Wooo—h!”

So roared the Nafílim ranks all around as I rived a Fiefguardsman afore me. But not a second to spare; onward we wended through the war-like press, all whilst our fellow braves pushed the battlefront forth, gaining ground pace by precious pace.

“Ach...! Hold the bloody line, damn it!!”

Out from the screaming misery of Men, a bark from a Fiefguard field commander. A high shout followed, as though in answer:

“There ‘e is! The Man amongst ‘em! Kill ‘im! Kill ‘i—m!!”

A Fiefguardsman, spewing froth from his lips and pointing a finger straight at the sole Man amongst the Nafílim files—a moment, and next converged unto me a crush of Fiefguard grunts. In each of their eyes burnt reflections of the renegade they so reviled.

But all the better. Drawing their ire should well-ease my allies’ burdens at the battlefront.

Soul set, I sent forth a wide swing of wolfsteel. *“Dyaah!”*

“Ghwohakh!?” so fell a swathe of enemy soldiers.

Yet ill-abated were their fellows' wrath for this rebel; in fact, their collective rancour only seemed to seethe all the more hotly. Opposite was I, keeping cool as best I could as I brandished the blackblade. Such was demanded by the white waters of war; only composure could carry me through this chaos. And so bearing myself against the brunt of brutes, I continued cutting them down one-by-one.

Amidst the failing front of Fiefguardsmen stood a soldier, staring me down with eyes so bitterly bloodshot that at any moment could they have burst with tears of red.

"Eyygh...!" he hissed, hate-filled and hag-like. *"Foul sicarius, you...!"*

..."Sicarius."

The high epithet of a perfidist, and yet another alias for my collection. Safe to say, historically hot must be Man's hate for this wayward son of his. Yet never one to so flagrantly fan another's fury, I felt then another pang of pity. With such creativity do they address me; would that I had the leisure or even half a care to return the favour.

All told, I took little offence to "sicarius". Only a soul with resolve enough to reject the machinations of this world could earn such a baleful brand. Why, I ought consider it a gift, really.

"Shog off, men!" cried a voice. "This one's mine!"

And there, keen to cut down that Sicarius was yet another blade, held in the hands of a Zaharte hellion.

Fiefguard eyes flickered with expectation. Swivelling to the voice's source, there the Men found the Zaharte challenger strutting through their parting press, his simper steeped in pride.

“‘Air an’ eyes, dim as dusk—the ‘ulkin’ berk ‘imself!” he shouted above the boil of battle, before raising a swordpoint in my direction. “Rolf, the turn-ed *wolf!*”

To him I gave a narrowed gaze. “Who speaks?”

“You ungraced gudgeon, you!!” he shouted on disregardfully. “That there grubby fingers stain the fine art o’ swordplay, they does!! Time to school you in *real* slicery!” Quite the self-absorbed simian, this man—or a scullion soused from endless ale. Then, without ceremony: “*Ssrryahh!*”

A shriek, and off he shot straight my way, his sword swung from on high. I met him with one of my own, batting sharp silver away with black steel.

—*Ghheen! Khaeen!*

One, two more exchanges, each stinging our ears. Practice guided his swings. Power girded his sword. An adept of the blade he was, much more so than the Fiefguard rabble gathered about us—Zaharte’s fame truly feigned no fluke. On and on he thrashed as I guarded in turn, backing gradually away whilst measuring his mettle.

“*Hyoh! Hyah!*” he huffed along with every hew. “Better start bitin’ back, shag! ‘Fore I nip that there neck o’ yers right clean!”

No doubt, then: this dastard really was inebriated, but from bottles of a different brew—the cider of supremacy, the rotgut of renown as the ungraced’s slayer-to-be. Next did we each venture a spirited swing, and as our blades bit and locked:

“Rolf! Our swords are yours!”

There: a cry from my comrades as they rallied to me, arms ready.

With a heave, I pushed away my opponent. “Nay, keep them! They’ll serve you better soon enough!” I answered. Though their succour was full-appreciated, more pressing was the mission at hand. The bastille loomed a long way off yet, and here we were, hemmed in still from all sides, having hastened deep into hostile ground. Any mind taken from self-protection was a peril beyond the price of this silly duel.

“As you will,” one of my braves conceded. “But your back is ours to guard!”

“Then you have it,” I nodded. “My thanks.”

Off the five then flew to fend off the mobs of Fieguardsmen, leaving me to dance with the Zaharte hellion unharried. Volker had chosen well: these braves were both capable and unclouded in scrying the course of this chaos. Comforted, I refocused upon my opponent, finding him snickering at the situation.

“Hyeheh! Warm chums with the witch-churls, ain’t ya? Eh, ungraced!?” he remarked, sword readied again.

Were I to fell him here now, the rest of the rabble should follow—a pinhole to sink the ship, as it were. Mulling the

thought, I readied my own weapon, triggering a charge from my foe.

“Yeeaaagh!” he shrieked, letting fly his sword in flailing slashes. The crescendo of clashing metals continued along with my vigilant defence. As he pushed forth, so did I pace back, a detail not lost to the Fiefguard lookers-on:

“Lo! The Zaharte master’s got the higher hand, he does!”

“Yea, that’s it! Chop ‘im t’chunks, ser! Ehyehh!”

Their jeering cheers seemed a wind in my foe’s sails, for as his ears drank their words, his eyes glimmered anew with battle-glee, his blade biting and barking with greater brutality. Dashing his weapon away with a sweep of the soot-steel, I shifted to the high guard for a reprisal.

–Ghosshr! Ghakh!

A one-two blast of banging blades—my twice-swung offence, foiled by my foe just in the nick of time. And it showed: sweat shone on his brows, his breaths heaved heavily. Though going by his up-curved smirk, that inflated pride of his remained unpunctured.

“‘E’s got th’book full-read, mates! It be over now!”

“They’re somethin’ else, innit? These Zaharte blokes!”

More applause from the Fiefguard grunts, each word further stoking my opponent’s spirits. Clear on his flustered face was a delight dancing more boldly than before.

“Heheh...” he smirked again. “...Well? Ready fer the checkmate, lad?”

Leisurely, he lifted his sword to the centre guard as a fisher looses his line into the depths. I bit the bait, bolting in just as he'd hoped. Grinning still, my foe slipped into a defensive stance, full-intent on a deft deflection and a deathblow following.

But this prey had humoured the predator for long enough.

Into the ground: a thunder-stamp of my foot, accelerating my charge to a speed beyond the sellsword's answering. Wolfsteel then howled forth—

—shhdofh!—

—and hewed open my mark's bosom, bone and breastplate both.

“Eah...?”

Hitherto had I feigned feeble-swordedness to this foe of mine, showing him swings and thrusts a mite milder than what his mettle could handle—a ploy oft played upon opponents of inferior skill not unlike he. Cast aside the cloak and reveal my full vehemence, however, and no longer could he keep up. Indeed, never did he seem a risk worth much regard, but this was a battlefield: *all* risks must be minded. For him, I merely obliged.

“W-wha...? O-ohhkh...” he gasped, utterly perplexed till his expiration. As his limp body spilt unto the dust, the surrounding Fiefguardsmen collectively recoiled.

There—our chance.

“The way's open!” I cried, raising high the sword of soot. *“Break through, break through!”*

“Ooo—oouhh!!”

Heeding my call, the Nafílim ranks roared and rushed forth altogether. Sighting the change from far off, Volker answered with a cry of his own.

“Staffeln Two and Three! Retrieve the wounded and draw back!” thundered his timely command. “Staffel Six! Advance, advance!”

Like currents cutting new courses, a great bustle was roused as braves flowed to and fro. Knowing the gate vicinity was too narrow to host our forces in full, we had ourselves split into disparate Staffeln beforehand for this battle; now as some withdrew from the fray, others joined in...

“We’ve waited for this!”

...with Lise and her own braves being one of them. With lightning immediacy befitting their leader, Lise’s Staffel filled the void and broke out fighting. Forces, drawing back and joining in—such was our strategy, that we might never show our foe a faltering in our numbers, not even for a moment.

“Haa—ah!” cried Lise, gusting through like a whirlwind, her two longdaggers dancing and dicing through Fiefguard flesh. Hers was a flair for the offensive flurry, of swings and scythings carried out with fleet frequency—a performance proving frighteningly effective in such close-quarters chaos as we were.

“Uaagh!?”

The screams of Men resounded as bit by bit their number yielded dear ground. Discerning their new despair, I

turned with fresh orders for my five braves.

“Ready up! This is it!” I cried. “We push through! All the way to the bastille!”

“Aye!” they returned in unison, and at once we charged straight into the enemy ranks. Lise’s longdaggers continued their lethal lashings, eating away at the Fiefguard line like a gouging gale.

“Tyah!”

“Sseh!”

My braves lacked naught in their own prowess. Their blades maimed and mowed down the unnerved Men, forcing forth the frontline like a steady and unstoppable tide.

“There, the left wing! Cut through! Now, now!!” so vaulted Volker’s orders. Indeed, the Fiefguard’s left flank was greatly thinned, having been eviscerated by Lise’s blades. Spying the opportunity, our forces washed in at once, but not before letting loose a mighty roar.

“Ooouuhh!!”

Another moment, and like a dam bursting open, the Fiefguard ranks gave against the weight of our offensive. The pinhole was now a gaping split, into which our number began to pour—a river, bristling with blades and bellowing voices; a torrent teasing out of the Men many a scream.

“Oaaggh!!”

“Fall back! Fall back an’ regroup!!”

Resistance was impossible against such a stampede; unable to maintain their line, the Fiefguardsmen broke ranks and scattered back. At last: the gate area was fully wrested. The way unbarred, our army of braves began storming the camp, where awaited new numbers of Fiefguard and Zaharte fighters alike. Horns blared to have them readied, but to our ears, it sooner sounded a heralding of the imminent end of this margravate of Ström.



A year after their departure, I'd followed in Emilie's and Brother's footsteps to the 5th. I remember well what I'd felt then: promise, anticipation... all made pale before my many dour doubts. And for why but dreading what drudgery and injustice Brother might had been brooking.

'Twas a dark day, then, when that all unfurled afore my very eyes. Slight and contempt, scorn and sport—these all were at once his sole companions, and at another, scars carven full into his flesh with every farcical spar.

But what'd bewildered me most was the bond between Brother and Emilie—that is, what it had become. A pair once so picturesque, now fraught and fractured, bound by what seemed more as bondage than a loving bond.

Emilie: an immediately accoladed dame. Brother: her subservient swain. A mistress and her minion. A relationship misshapen.

Yet it remained a matter without remedy. No, not by Emilie's power could it've been mended, nor by her

prestige... nor even by her many protests. Such was our society, our world. I'd desired deeply for Brother to do his part, at the very least. To soothe her sorrows, to solve his situation by any means available. But he'd instead kept silent and endured the disdain, devoting himself full-stolid to his martial disciplines—a cowed escape, a meaningless pursuit, no matter how I measured it.

Less and less I knew his heart.

The heart of my own brother.

The heart of whom I so cherished.

Yet soon were my concerns constricted to my own burdens. The abrupt expectation of my parents, the bearing of House Buckmann's future... Such unwieldy weights, alleviated only by chivalric merit, by achievement... by results.

Nonetheless, passing under the Order's portcullis for the very first time, I'd steeled myself against one certainty: a harried, handicapped start. Sister to an ungraced, bloodkin to a black sheep—no doubt such a soul would stoke stares most unsavoury. All the jeers and japery reserved for my brother, soon to be mine to share. And though share I did, so, too, was I pitied. More so than I deserved, perhaps. Thus did I climb the knightly ladder rather unladed.

'...Yoná has bestowed Her blessings upon you, Officer Buckmann... Proper, unprofane blessings... So I say, let not that man drag you down so...'

Words once offered to me by the Mareschal Tallien.

Our Deiva's is an even hand, never wont to wield unjust retribution. The Order itself is a bastion to such a belief, its

knights fast followers of fairness. And so I abided, going on to earn some repute amongst their number, for it happened that I'd been bequeathed a bounty of ody. Not to the same degree as Emilie's, but enough to astonish my peers and superiors all the same.

'...Globus Igneus...!'

A sphere of flames, kindled by my hand as instructed. But more a wonder in the eyes of my instructor, of all those gathered to bear witness:

'...Praises upon Yoná...' one of them had uttered then, *'...a miracle stands 'fore us...!'*

Burning brilliant in the air above me: my very first conjuration of the Globus Igneus spell, but woven to a size manyfold my instructor's example. 'Twas not only generous ody that I'd been graced with—on that day was discovered my talent for sorcery itself.

One year thence found me a lieutenant, leader to my own brigade division. A worthy promotion for House Buckmann's next-in-line, and certainly a cause for much celebration. But through another lens, it had only seemed yet another rift opening anew between Brother and myself.

'...Gh... hhach...!'

'...Oi...! Back on your trotters, sty-churl...! Training's only begun...! ...Tch...! Better a strawman than you...'

Whilst the gown of fair regard was mine to wear, the gazes of reverence mine to garner, down in the dirt was my brother, steeped in soot and soil... and shame. A woefully often sight, and in beholding it, I'd begun to feel... something, somewhere deep in my bosom...

...icing over. Ever so steadily.

'...Quite the rising star of late... aren't you, Felicia...?'

*'...Rising star, indeed...! You are our pride, my dear...!
Our joy...!'*

'Tis not too far between the barony and headquarters. Thus did I make certain to return home and meet Mother and Father, time permitting. And on every occasion would their compliments rain my way.

...But only my way.

Brother's was a name long forsaken upon their lips. But 'twas not to be helped. Mother and Father could not boast of him, no... They could not... Not for that brother of mine.

'...Lady Felicia...'

My address, cold with decorum... and spoken in Brother's own voice.

It'd sat ill with me at first, but with his every utterance of it, less and less its briars began to bite.

Neither of us, nor any at all, can dare sustain our childhood innocence forever. Each winter's passing brings change—to us, to our hearts...

...to the bonds between us.

...

..

.

.

..

...

...Still.

Still, I wish not to cast him from my sight.

Still, I wish not to abandon him.

Such thoughts I inly intone, as though to convince myself of their sincerity. Yet little convincing is needed: in them is nary a lie. That, I can adamantly declare.

I do not despise my brother. Not at all. In my heart of hearts, I harbour no hate for him.

And as with me, so 'tis with Emilie. Of this, too, am I most certain.

†

“ ... ”

...Now.

Now could I hear again the howls of battle, the beating of war-like feet, the fanging of swords and spears.

From afar I watched the fray as it raged where the gate once stood. There, with desperate industry, the Fiefguard toiled to turn the tide of Nafílim, but try as they might, more and more their number bled, more and more their brethren broke, all against the brimming brunt of their foes.

A humbling sight surely unlost to Viola's eyes. Hers was a high perch upon the watchtower, where to this moment was she dictating the defence with the field commanders. Yet the effort seemed fraught: no sooner after the gate had been unmade that the battle began to boil to its present pitch, with friend and foe alike feverishly mired in a mad *mêlée*. All advantage offered by our defences was fast fading; through Viola's fingers was fleeting the fine sand of victory.

Though I thought her hardly at fault. The situation was dire to begin with. Many Fiefguard captains had been cut down in the prior battle. Yet despite scarce time to regroup and reforge the frayed chain of command, the Fiefguard fought rather well under Viola's watch. But mightier still was the enemy's momentum. Unchanged, our situation would soon fail.

As if to corroborate my reckoning, there next swelled a chorus from the frontline, terrible as 'twas sudden. The Fiefguard had foundered. Through their ranks then flooded the Nafílim, breaking brazenly into the camp proper.

Now more than ever, the Fiefguard seemed destined for defeat. And just as destined: the fall of Arbel, the Nafílim occupation of Ström, the loss of Londosian land—a calamity certain to appal our posterity. And to think, that counted

amongst the confederates to this historic crisis could be that brother of mine. I had many words for him, if so, and a great many more I should like to hear from him.

For that very purpose had I sued to join this battle, a request heeded only on condition that I stand by in this corner of the rearguard. Viola was most loath to let me meet my own brother, I think, and so had disallowed me from lifting even a finger to reinforce her men.

All fine and good, truth be told. Where that brother of mine might appear, I could well-foresee. Turning 'round, I looked up at his probable destination: the bastille, looming grim and grey against the besmoked skies. Why he would, whether he would—these I ill-guessed. But if for certain he'd made fast friends with the Nafílim, then more certain again would he make haste to this very structure, and there endeavour a deliverance of the prisoners within.

I stood alone here in the open. Gone were the few Fiefguardsmen once manning this post, having hastily headed off to their final reckoning at the fray. But that struggle was theirs and theirs alone to assay. Mine was to wait. For the sharer of my blood. For the inspirer of Viola's trepidation:

'...Brigadier...

*...That brother of yours has sore-scorned both Crown and
kinsmen,
choosing instead to walk the traitor's way... for why we
can never know...*

*...And in bringing to bear the full brunt of his fearsome
prowess*

*has he made culled and cornered curs of the once-proud
Fiefguard...*

*...Who with right mind, then, should reckon he surrender
when such a storm it is he rides against us...?’*

“Fearsome prowess”.

Wielded to “make cornered curs” out of the Fiefguard.

The words of the renowned Zaharte captain herself. And regarding whom but my own brother. Yet in hearing them was I hardly filled with pride and joy—I had but stood, silenced by their meaning. Just as I’d been silent these many past seasons. Silent of trust in Brother’s strength. Silent of praise for all his pains. Silent, like all the others in the Order.

Nay. ‘Twas perhaps jealousy and shame that Viola had teased out of me. A mere sellsword, neither an associate nor an acquaintance of Brother, yet speaking of him as though she’d shared more winters with him than his own sister.

Was it simply that somehow, somewhere deep in my heart, I yet yearned for him? Just as I’d done during our littler years? Was it that too hastily, too capriciously had I despaired at his present pitiableness? At his sheen, sullen and sallow as ‘twas to his former shine? Such thoughts I’d felt faintly afire in me when Viola pressed for my answer there in the manor.

Yet what recourse did I have? Who was it that failed me? Who was it that fell to arrant frailness? Had my brother

remained the lodestar I so adored, would we yet be whirling in woe as we were now?

Mine were not the clouded eyes here, were they? Of course not. My measure of him was most certainly sound. Why, lo—there's Brother now, hurrying hither. To this very place, to the deliverance of the prisoners—just as prevised.

Yet in seeing him, trouble sooner beset me than cheer, truth be told. Trouble for his coming. Trouble for his presence here upon a battlefield, of all places. 'Twas all an error; to this moment was he elsewhere, far away on his holiday—a gladness, if so.

But nay. Familiar was his form. Fleet was his faring. Onward he hurried my way, surrounded by what else but a pack of Nafílim fighters—his comrades and escorts, like as not, having just felled in his place the Fiefguardsmen barring their course.

Before long, the two of us stood aface, still and silent. Five months in the making, my reunion with Brother—Rolf Buckmann, the exile.

A rather unremarkable length of time, thinking on it. But one feeling more an eternity from last I'd seen of him at the hearing...

...from last we had words for one another.



“Felicia...?”

“...Brother.”

Never was his face a fountain of expression. Still, in our earlier days, I’d prided myself in guessing his heart with just a single glimpse.

But now...

...no longer could I see the heart behind those eyes.



All sins must answer, all treachery put to trial. Whether before a god, a judge... or a loved one. For such a reckoning had I well-steeled myself. Yet, that the day should dawn so soon...

The fates—ever fain to twist the stabbing dagger, to taunt the staggered soul. I felt then some watchful eye raising me some concealed question, demanding my due remorse.

...Nay.

Enough of the fates, of blaming the clouds... of looking away.

I’d chosen this path. And in so doing had chosen also strife against my own blood, my own family:

Felicia.

“...Those Nafílim,” my sister flatly began, “let them away where they must. They’ve business in the bastille, have they not?”

Bafflement flashed through my braves. Not that any blame could be theirs. A foe, yielding the way? At once they turned to me, racked by the riddle.

“Go,” I said to them. “She looks to have business of her own—with me.”

“...Aye,” answered a brave. “Rolf. Fair winds find you.”

Having swiftly judged the situation, they started straightway, passing my sister with due caution before disappearing into the bastille. Once certain of their safe passage, I returned my gaze to Felicia, finding hers long focused upon me.

“You’re sullied from head to heel, Brother,” she remarked. “Soot, is it?”

“No soldier goes unsullied. Such is war,” I said back. “But let’s cut to the quick—why are you come, Felicia?”

“...I was ‘the Lady Felicia’ to you, last we spoke.”

“You could be again, if you so wish. That much I owe you: a politeness for my newest opponent.”

“...hh!” Felicia half-gasped, as though stung by that last word. Then, with a strained regard: “...I *was* come... to enquire why you refused the recruitment call, Brother.”

“‘Recruitment’?” I echoed. “...Ah. *That.*”

A call to Londosius' brighter minds for the post of Chief Adjutant of the 5th Chivalric Order. A call I myself had received, but left to collect dust upon the commandant's desk—full-aware it was worded for me and my homecoming.

"Where was your answer?" my sister pressed. "Why were *you* not come?"

"Because my feet had found another path, Felicia. A way I now walk with resolve... after renouncing all reason for return."

It'd arrived at a rather inopportune time, that call: a mere month before my quest into Nafílim country. The rekindled promise of knighthood, weighed against a promise made with Mia... The choice was clear. But absent the latter, still would silence have been my answer, for though I'd shared a road with Emilie and Felicia for many winters, mine now wended far away from theirs. Too, too far away.

"...What 'path'?" Felicia asked, troubled. "You were *banished*, Brother. Retribution, not resolve, was what had flung you to this fringeland—a bane to any other eye, but a *boon* to yours alone...? Surely you cannot be so blind to your own folly?"

"My eyes see no folly."

"But *mine* do!"

Her cry, concise, yet unclear. Though one thing was certain: sincerely was my sister trying to pour out her long-shut heart. An effort looking as painful as it was long overdue. Why, she'd braved a whole journey just for the opportunity. To not oblige her here would be remiss of me as her brother.

“What is ‘resolve’ to you, then, Felicia?” I began to debate. “Is it not the sparking of the soul afire? The braving of the dark when all light is lost? A self-given grace to any other soul, but a grief to yours alone?”

“What tears have you shed, to speak of my grief!?” she screamed back. “Emilie offered both hand and heart to you, that you should be helped from this hole! And yet...! Yet you brushed away that hand! You broke that very heart!”

Felicia, shivering with fury.

When was it, I wonder? When last she’d shown such ire? Perhaps never. In all the years of her youth, scant were her tantrums. And even then were they but the tiniest sort, not once breaking above quiet discontent. How it haunted me, then, to hear her fair voice moved to such misery.

Amidst that moment of reminiscence for little Felicia, I heard again that same voice, grown now, but low with languor.

“...Tell me, Brother. Was it truly you? Was it by your fault that Emilie’s steed was vanished?”

“I’d well-made my case at the hearing,” I answered. “Weren’t you listening?”

“An entire night in town! Yet too tipsied to remember aught!? Who could’ve lent ear to such a farce!?” she cried again, agonised. “A night... spent bedding with some... some *brothel-maiden...!*? Don’t tell me *that* was the truth of it!”

“An empty allegation, fed by the leaders,” I quickly cut back. “Don’t tell me *you* swallowed their slander?”

“I never wanted to! Never! But what else was left to me!? *What!?*” she screamed, her lungs now spent from lament. Overlapping her again was the ghost of her greener days: my toddling sister, tiny and in tearful tantrum.

“Felicia,” I said, as though to soothe her. “Circumstance was what’d stopped the truth at my lips. Silence and sophistry were all I had left. But let me ease you, nonetheless: it was not I who let that horse loose. And as to whether I’d produced coin for a corner-girl, well... no confessor would find the purchase worth chiding, I’d think. But as you insist, I’ll set it straight again: no such deed was ever mine.”

Her eyes then cast quietly down. Whether from comfort or some conflict within, I could not know.

“Believe me, or believe *them*—which way you walk is yours to decide,” I went on. “Reach that resolve by your own two feet, Felicia. I’ve walked beside you as far as any brother could—but no further. No longer.”

“...What’s this so sudden?” she uttered, slowly shaking her head. “Why play the dear brother now...? The stage is dark... the curtains long-closed...”

...That it was.

To yearn for the model brother; such is the right of any younger sister. Her prince and paragon, her guide and aegis, meek yet mighty, firm yet fair. Ousted from that stage though I was, I forsook the part for her protection... and in so doing left Felicia without a brother.

Thus could I not be who she wanted me to be. I could not answer my own sister’s simplest, most innocent and deserved desire.

“...Brother. I know not what tricks you’ve chanced against your trials thus far... but the battlefield ill-feigns the gentle judge. Not by deceit can you forever flee your sentence,” she warned at length, clenching tightly the silverstaff against her bosom. “And yet you would chance another trial here? Against *me*? A reverie of a victory is your lightest verdict, Brother, surely you see this...! As well as I can! So please... come with me, Brother? Come home... to where you ought be.”

Where I ought be.

Who I ought be.

What way I ought walk.

...Difficult, isn’t it, Felicia? Yet not few are those without direction, without selfhood, without a home to call their own. This, you ought know. Just as you ought know that no longer do I count myself amongst them.

I’ve found what I’ve long sought.

“Pay your penance... quit this chaos. Won’t you do this for me, Brother?” Felicia further pleaded. “Emilie yearns for your return, even now! Her sway is mighty, her wings welcoming! Shelter under them, and not even your present sins shall—”

I shook my head. “Felicia. I’m sorry.”

Indeed, I’ll not wend away from where I’m finally welcome. I’ll not baulk this battle of mine.

“...’Sorry’... you said?”

“That I did.”

A new hush.

Once more, Felicia's gaze fell. Ruby eyes, brimming with beauty—hid now behind lengths of forlorn lashes.

"...Why?" she brokenly began again. "Why continue this tantrum? Why challenge the chariots of war, child as you are? Five winters, Brother, *five*. And still I find you stunted. Yet you've gall enough to... to twirl that *twig* of yours afore fearsome titans...! What shame...! Please, Brother... *please...* no more."

Shame? Never have I shuddered at any shame I've shown. My days in the Order—days of being laid low, of being left beaten, bantered, and ablood—all of them I'd endured that I might crawl a mite closer to that tiny light at tunnel's end.

But to stand aside, stayed and made an unwilling witness to her brother's unbrookable labour—such was Felicia's lot, her lament. Such was my only regret.

"Won't you come with me, Brother?" she went on. "Forget this fool fight... Come home? And there find employ under House Valenius; live anew with duty, strive again with dignity... and... and then—"

"Felicia." Once more, I shook my head. "It's not to be."

My sister, surpassing all pain in her bosom to beg my return. A struggle as clear as it was cutting. But I could not oblige.

I can't go back, Felicia.

Nay—I won't.

“‘Twas we who’d sent you here, ‘tis certain... but what choice had we!? What more of mercy could we have accorded you!? When so jealously did you hide from us the truth!?”

Brimming over with emotion, no longer could my sister confine her screams. No longer could she dam her tears.

“And *still* did we assay to send for you! *Still* we wanted you back home! That recruitment call—you ought’ve known full-well ‘twas for you and you alone! How we *trusted* to your answer...! How we *yearned* for your return...! Emilie and I both!!”

“...”

“...You would betray us, then? *Us*? Your beloved? Your bloodkin? Our differences, I’ll not deny, but... but are we so fraught? That you would fain forget aught and all you’ve once cherished? Who can find closure in such cruelty, Brother? Who...?”

Felicia’s voice was quivering.

An answer for her, then. From this failure of a brother to his long-forlorn sister: a raw, aching answer. Such she deserved, at the very least.

“‘Closure’? ‘Cruelty’?” I broke my silence. “Mere leisures and luxuries, Felicia. Comforts beside the bale and brutality of *this reality*. It *cuts*, it *coldens*, it *confounds*—all with a smile most serene, all... whilst innocents are pillaged and put to the sword.”

“...”

“I... I simply stand to strike it all down.”

“...What reality, Brother?” she beseeched. “Strike down *what?*”

“Londosius.”

“...hh!!” she gasped again, fully now, her countenance blanched of all colour, as though receiving at last the full brunt of her brother’s betrayal. “...You are set, then...?” she asked, almost breathless. “You would turn against Kin and Crown? Find fellowship with the Nafílim?”

“Kin of Man, kin of Nafílim—we’re souls all alike,” I returned. “And so I say this: it is *because* I am a soul that I must stand, fight, and forge on. For my conviction. For my creed.”

“Then you would strike down your own sister, as well? Dame of Londosius that she is?”

“If her fall should further peace... yes. I would.”

Hearing my answer, Felicia stood stunned and hushed. She turned down to the ground, staring at it strengthlessly, as though all meaning and purpose had expired asudden. A still span followed, filled only with the far din of the fray, till at last Felicia’s lips parted slowly again.

“...simple chore...” so rose a whisper of hers. “...’Tis a simple chore... to break your every limb and lug you back... Know you not my mettle, Brother...? How it stands a mountain over your own?”

“Felicia,” I answered, gripping tight the soot-steel. “Not even unlimbed will I yield. No deals will I cut, no quarter will I give. Such is my dignity—and the respect you deserve, as a fellow wager of war.”

“You foresee my fall, Brother!? By your blunted blade!?” she shouted, shooting her gaze at me anew. Her ruby-rose regard—no less lovely it was, even when veiled behind so many tears. “I’m a Dame Brigadier to the Order!! And you!? What’re you but Rolf Buckmann, the ungraced!?”

“It’s ‘Rolf’.”

A blink. “...What...?”

“‘Rolf Buckmann’ is no longer,” I stated firmly. “Only ‘Rolf’ remains.”

Felicia grimaced. “...You would renounce our noble name? Our house? Then renounce it full, why not!? Forget, too, your birth name! Your first gift from Mother and Father!”

“The first of only few. But nay—I like it enough.”

A lull. And then...

...a roar.

“...Enough,” Felicia uttered lowly. “Enough of this.”

Drowning out now the drone of distant battle: a deluge of odyl. Streams over streams, swirls under swirls, bright odyl dancing like a storm, in whose eye stood an indignant Felicia. A veritable maelstrom of magick, matching the ire and energy of its mistress’ emotions. The air palpably pressed in from all directions. Skin tingled, senses blared; afore my sister—this celestine child of heaven-sent sorcery—seemed to bend and bow the whole of the world itself.

“Stand against ‘this reality’, you said? ‘Strike it all down’?” resounded Felicia above the bellowing odyl. “Then let me unfurl for you another fold to this ‘reality’. One that

finds you frail, stricken of all strength to stand—*your* reality, Brother.”

All at once, the storm surged and scintillated. Felicia’s fair features glimmered, her sable-silk hair billowed, her blood-ruby eyes blazed. Mesmerised by the sight for but an instant, I readied forth the *svortaskan* at once.

This was it. The fated fight. The vying of each our full-unveiled resolve.

“Know now your folly! Your shame!! And repent!!”

The Dame Brigadier to the Sorcerers of the 5th Chivalric Order: Felicia Buckmann.

My sister.

My family.

...My foe.

————— ∴ —————

“Tonitrus!”

Up swung the silverstaff, down showered the levin-shafts; a stampede of pillars rampaging right my way.

I threw myself aside in an instant, and in the next, witnessed numberless flashes slashing through where I once stood. Air burned white, earth smouldered black. In my ears: the cackle of electricity. In my nose: a stench like sweet, seared iron.

Tonitrus—one of the basic magicks, but mastered by Felicia unto a fatal monstrosity. Its speed, its spite, all surpassed dauntingly aught a common caster could ever dare. In that briefest of moments, whilst illumined by the lurching levin, my thoughts turned to the 5th's Sorcery Brigade.

With the war effort whipped to a fever following the recapture of Mt. Godrika, the 5th saw then a sudden influx of new personnel. Days of late found the Sorcery Brigade burgeoned to five divisions, each helmed by lieutenants of genuine ability. But high above them all loomed their leader: the brigadier, mightiest of the 5th's sorcerers.

That very soul was afore me now: Felicia, a lieutenant at sixteen years of age, a brigadier at seventeen. For two years thereafter did she hold fast her position, her youth yielding not a seam in her supremacy. Though she'd long stood in the shadow of Emilie's heroic strength, no mistake was to be made: my sister was a prodigy without peer.

All magick-apt recruits learn first the Globus Igneus spell. Felicia was no different. Only, she'd conjured hers to thrice the size of her senior's example—to this very day, an episode fresh in the minds of the 5th.

A sister full-bloomed from bud to flower-field... Perhaps I ought rejoice.

Or perhaps not.

For over her skyward staff now floated a flaming sphere: fearsome and phenomenal, a veritable sun sent down to this plane...

“Globus Igneus!”

...to immolate this mortal unto embers.

—*Gwofh!*

The fireball flew. The air rippled. A glimpse of its magma-red mantles gave away an affrighting truth: this spell’s *fivefold* size belied an odylic density *manyfold more* tremendous.

Struck by such strength, I tumbled away in terror... only to find myself aface yet another sphere—Felicia’s twice-incanted trap was sprung. Caught in the ensuing explosion, blows burned and blasted at every facet of my body as I was thrown through the air. Into the dust I crashed, and laid there scorched and soiled, limp and lifeless, a sight formerly witnessed many a time upon the training grounds of the 5th.

...Such was the scenario scribed in my sister’s mind. “Felicia’s infallible offence”, she might’ve fancied it. How utterly wide her eyes went, then, when they beheld instead not her brother in flight—

“Humgh!”

—but his black hewer plunging into the heat of her flames.

Boom!

Hiss.

...*Hush.*

Hot winds coldened unto calm. Snuffed was the summoned sun. Felicia's fivefold sphere of flames—twained to naught by a single, sooted sword.

"What...?" she gasped, ill-tracing what'd transpired afore her eyes.

The look of sound astonishment—and chance. Seizing it, I speed through the distance between us, bearing the blackblade low.

"Ah—*ech!*" Felicia stammered. Only half a second now separated us, but alas: my sister sooner snapped from her confoundment and scrambled forth another spell. **"F-Flagrāns Vallum!"**

Bright fences of flame unfurled right afore my face, barring my warpath. With a stamp, I halted—"*Szyah!*"—and sheared straightway through the blaze, only to find in its extinguished wake my quarry gone from sight. Quickly I began to scan about, but no sooner did a sound then strike my ears.

"A ruse...?" began a breathless murmur. "Is this some ruse you play?"

There, from many paces away to the side stood a freshly fled Felicia, gasping and glaring at me as though haunted. To which I readied not words, but my weapon once more.

"Some sleight of the sword?" her doubting continued. "My spells... snuffed from all sight?"

"If such be what your eyes've seen, then best start believing them—soon," I answered at last.

“N-no!” my sister cried. “A bald lie! I’ll not believe it...!”

“Then why the fear? The flight?” I said, ever slowly stepping closer. “Come—meet my blade. Your precious paling ought shield you, shouldn’t it?”

“This can’t be...” she muttered again, incredulous, “...it *cannot...*”

Never have I liked such a line. The “impossibles”, the “this-can’t-be’s”—mere admissions to an unimaginative mind, oft spewed by the more pious of the population. Lambs, doubting adamantly aught they deem deviant from their shepherd’s designs, sooner seeing a hill for its grasses than the wolves prowling its slopes.

Naught but escapism, I say. But that Felicia herself had fallen victim to that same vice... As her brother, a pity.

...But for her opponent, an opportunity.

I bolted forth again, keen to close the distance before my mark could snap out of her stupor.

But too late: “*Hht!*” she gulped, flourishing fast her silverstaff. “**Feriēns Flagrum!!**”

Shrieking now against the air: a geyser-whip of grinding waters. By Felicia’s might, it looked ready to rend through rock and armour alike—and make mush of an ungraced, given chance. Halting, I steadied myself and my nerves, and facing the scything surge, sent against it the sword of soot.

There: the spell’s angle of attack, aimed not at my neck, but my ankles—seeming proof that not yet had my sister mustered the resolve to reckon with her brother. But for her, it served well enough. Having forced her foe to pause and

tame the torrential whip, once again was Felicia able to flee all danger.

“*Gh...*” she panted from afar, watching her waters unravel against my sword. “...Brother!”

At a loss for words, she puckered her sweat-beaded brows. Fatigue seemed to have set in, but not on account of consecutive spellcasts, no. More likely that a weariness was weighing heavily on her mind, with much thought spun to grasp this absurd situation.

“What... what is this? *How...?*” she pressed with broken breaths, but again I dared not an answer, choosing instead to study the distance between us. In so doing, I caught a clearer glimpse of her distress: the countenance of a cornered mark. Yet reality knew a different score, for in truth, not once had I gained her enough to attempt an offence.

Ever am I disposed to the counterattack, but such proved small avail against a capable spellweaver. Here, my sword was my sole weapon, the game of cat-and-mouse my sole recourse—one finding my foe free to fire upon me at pleasure.

There must be a better way. But what? Likely would I be pinned down, and very soon. Forced into error, nailed by a direct blow—my fast defeat, then and there. Exhausting my mark’s stores of odyll was one idea, but worthy only against the stock sorcerer. No, Felicia’s reserves were unfathomable; a waiting game against her would dig my early grave.

The chase it was, then. Begrudgingly, I crept forth, scraping my soles against the gravel and glaring at the gap between us.

“‘What is this,’ I said! Explain at once!!” shouted Felicia, soured by my silence.

“Explain what?” I returned. “Clean up your questions, will you?”

“My spells...! Severed by your sword! *How!?*”

“You’ve said it yourself, haven’t you? I severed—*snuffed* them out of sight.”

“...*Gh!!*” Her face reddened with rage. A sincere response from a soul most sincere since her earliest days. Indeed, ever was my sister easily thwarted by guile and negotiation. Of course, never have I wished her rather grown to a more cynical and scrying sibling, but to see her so handily heated by a few words well-stoked my worries.

Not that worrying for her was any right of mine. No longer, anyway.

“Quit your japery!” Felicia cried back. “You’ve no such strength! None! None at all!”

With a twirl, she then held her staff forward and flat, calling unto herself accretions of odyll from all around. The air in their courses coldened unto clouds of diamond dust, glittering and dancing. A stance of artistry—and a favourite of Felicia’s.

“Glārea Pruīnae!!”

At once, the cold collected into fist-thick hunks of floating hail. Summoning five was already a feat, yet my eyes sighted a greater count: ten—nay, even more so. Rapid chirps next pierced the air. They had bolted, speedy blurs now bound for my midst.

Whether inspired by preference or perception, Felicia's was a shrewd hand to have sent the Glārea Pruīnae against a foe such as I. Sundering spells was my winning card; not without swinging the *svǫrtaskan* could it be played. Then perhaps her mind was to employ a spell unanswerable by swordsmanship. Not a flying ball of fire nor a bulwark of flames, but veritable gunne-stones of ice, smaller and many in number, fired all at once to pin down her prey.

But just as my sister was no stock sorcerer, so was I no stock swordsman. With scant time left, I stood poised, taking up the low guard and locking my gaze upon the line of fire. Eschewing focus upon any one missile, I took them all instead for a single flock, that I might scry the mind behind their movements.

Twelve. That was their count. Eight were aimed elsewhere, to strike me in my escape—or root me down for the remnant four.

So be it. Daring no motion, I immediately emptied my lungs and eased my every sinew. Only a slice of a second now till contact, a meagre span for the preparation to follow. But I could not panick. Not here. A misstep and I'd be blasted to bits. Taming my nerves, I relaxed the last lengths of my body and melded my mind into the very air about me.

...

..

.

...Done.

In my eyes: ice, flickering in reflection.

In my body: sinews, surging asudden.

In the air: the sword of soot, soaring.

“Hhhupf!!”

—Kkhaakkhnn!

A shriek of shattered ice. Four tones in tight unison. Struck out of the air by the blackblade, the halved hailstones dissipated into a fine mist. Beyond it was Felicia’s form, standing stunned. Assailed by one absurdity after another, hers seemed a mind scarce caught up to the moment. The feeling was mutual, to be frank, as still was I reeling from our reunion here at the horntip of Londosius.

A reunion not of love and levity, but violence...

Or perhaps I ought see the silver lining, instead. “A life in want of certainty at least never wants for excitement.” Yes. A jolly motto to follow.

...Nay.

Such naïveté ill-lives in so wicked a world.

Stung again by the mercilessness of Man’s machinations, I instinctively clenched the sword of soot with renewed resolve.

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“No...” my sister muttered, lungs heavy. “No sword ought unmake a magick... none...”

A slight shiver haunted her shoulders. Unsurprising; Felicia was a sorceress extraordinaire, a devout of the magicks—and their arrant dependant. To have them all avail her so little, so asudden; to see her Yoná-given talent, her years of toil so clearly cleft in two, surely came as a shock to her.

“Yet *this* sword can,” I rebutted.

“No!” she cried, shaking her head. “What madness! I-I’ll not believe it! I won’t!”

“Then don’t,” I firmly returned. “Believe or deny as you like. If you cannot trust to the truth afore your very eyes... go ahead. Shut them. Shield that pride of yours.”

“*Gh...!*” she winced, a child cornered by criticism. And in scolding her had I been edging closer, prowling with wary paces. Not yet had she reckoned the full reach of my charge, but she should think it quite short, by my guess. Her fatal blunder, if so; what remained was to arrive in range, and...

“Striking... shattering my ice in their *flight...?*” my sister muttered again, yet mired in disbelief, “...you show one deception after another...!”

“Not deception, Felicia. *Discipline,*” I corrected. “The sword has answered my faith. This ‘twig’ now *topples* your ‘titans’.”

“...*hh!!*”

A pained expression, not unlike another shown winters ago. ‘*Is there meaning?*’ she’d enquired me then. Meaning in swinging the sword, cutting naught but air. Meaning in

walking the woeful path, knowing naught but futility. At last, the answer was clear—to us both.

“Still...” she inly wrangled on, “...still, I... I can’t...”

Separating us now: a span fewer than five passūs, shrinkable to nought were I given but a breath to dare it. So all along Felicia’s figure I looked, reckoning the rhythm of her respiration. And the instant I scried her body at its laxest, her lungs at their emptiest—

“Hhet!!”

—I lunged.

Felicia’s eyes flashed, her silverstaff flourished.

“F-Frīgidus Ensis!!”

—Vvfaaohh!!

About her accreted wintry gales, stopping as soon as they had started. Forming out of them: crystals of airborne ice, keen daggers each, splaying and speeding in now to dice me alive—all twenty of them.

“Egh!!” I groaned. A score of dancing blades, catching me unawares but with only a single sword to answer them. “Damn it!” I broke my charge, bounding off and barely eluding the bladed blurs. Hoary air hissed past. Screeches whistled. Rounding about, they returned with all speed, and facing them, I jerked and twisted to and fro in avoidance as their darting became more and more daring.

“So you can twirl that twig—what of it!?” Felicia cried. “Soon or late, even the mightiest boughs must break!”

Twenty blades, zig-zagging independently. Twenty puppets, strung to one mind—now more than before was I reminded of my sister’s prowess.

And her limits.

A genius of spellweaving she was, but equally a simpleton of sword-wielding: though the blades flitted about fleetly, filling the air with myriad chirps and shrieks, none had hitherto closed in for the kill. Wagering on the safe thought, I began striking them down one-by-one, all the while bearing caution and seeking a chance to charge upon my foe.

—*Keekh! Bakhnn!*

Frozen blades, broken as they sailed and sniped. A clear and crystalline rhythm, during which *it* finally flickered: a lull most transient. Snatching the opportunity, I leapt forth, sending the black sword towards my sister—

—to stab her straight through.

“Aaakh!!”

A wrenching scream.

At last, my blade had met its mark.

Yet... all the sooted sword did savour was but a grazing wound upon my sister’s shoulder. The transgression was swiftly chided: unto me then converged every remnant blade of ice. Turning quick, I engaged the deadly darts, culling them till their very last. At length, the air was empty again, with Felicia once more fled to a safer distance.

There she was: standing and grasping her left shoulder. Under those tight fingers trickled deep crimson.

“...Brother...” she muttered, “...has spilt my blood... Brother’s blade...! *My blood...!*”

Laid full-bare was Felicia’s bewilderment. And for me, just the same: a surge of emotions assailing me at once, turbid as it was terrible.

Once upon a recent time had I imagined this moment. But to *live* it was a betrayal against all expectation.

Carving through her flesh—the faint but infallible feeling yet haunted my hands like a memory of murder, a blustery storm beating away at my bosom down to its very depths. Before I knew it, my face was twisted in turmoil, my teeth clenching as though bearing a deathly pain. All sound had sped away to some great yonder, leaving naught but my heart to hammer away in my ears. So ghastly was the struggle that were I any less collected, I might’ve collapsed then and there.

Yet I didn’t. I couldn’t. Not here. Not now. This, I had to endure. My resolve, I had to realise.

...Yes. That’s right.

My resolve.

I’d steeled myself for this.

This deed that must needs be done.

Catching my lungs idled, I resumed respiring. My body, I re-emboldened. My spirits, I resuscitated. From my mind I

rejected all remnant sensation of having sheared the flesh of my kin... to whom I next gave my gaze.

And whose name spilt from my lips.

“Felicia...”

My sister.

My bond of blood.

The same blood now streaming down her shoulder.

Smears and rivulets of red, an ocean drowning my brotherly heart. How it harrowed me to reel it back up, to re-narrow my every nerve to the battle at hand. As this was exactly that: a battle. For the souls I’d sworn to protect. For a future that might foster them all.

I forcefully inhaled, feeding precious air back to my brain, before calming my heart and cooling my thoughts—I must needs scry what would come next, and carefully.

Above—that’s where Felicia stood. Above and beyond my prior expectations. An epiphany reached for the first time in this fight, for never could I have imagined her mastery of so close-quartered and contrarian a spell like the Frīgidus Ensis.

Oft do battlefields find sorcerers assigned to more distant perches, where they might employ their magicks with precision and impunity. Thus are near-ranged spells left wholly neglected, save for the errant case or by the eclectic adept. With nary a niche to fill nor shortcuts to their arduous mastery, and withal too many subtleties needed for their deft use, such spells are long regarded as naught more than tricks of the parlour.

But not so to my sister.

She'd taken the trek less travelled, not only mastering one such spell, but availing her very life with it on this day. Felicia Buckmann—a preeminent spellweaver, through and through.

Yet one fact remained: not without paying a great toll of odyi could the Frīgidus Ensis be woven. A toll exacted more heavily again from Felicia, for though it had proven a gainly gambit for busying my blade, it was no fewer than a *score* of the icy-steels that she'd conjured up, and in an instant, at that.

As though to corroborate my guess, Felicia's breathing was now reduced to a laboured pant. Tonitrus, Globus Igneus, Flagrāns Vallum, Feriēns Flagrum, Glārea Pruīnae—and Frīgidus Ensis, all incanted to supreme scale and quantity. Indeed, not even a wunderkind like herself, though availed by a nigh-bottomless well of odyi, could remain untouched by such expenditure.

The way to victory was opened, then. But as I pondered how I might wend through it—*bang!*—clapping through the air next was an explosion, birthed from the bowels of the bastille overlooking our battle.

"*Mn?*" I twitched, broken from my thoughts. The cause of the commotion: a Lancea Calōris spell, like as not. Right; at this very moment were my braves, too, embroiled in their own battle somewhere in that building. To catch wind of their combat ought've been obvious enough.

But in beholding the bastille so fully did an unnamed emotion begin gnawing away at me. Visions next awoke in my heart. Of Mia, captive and made to suffer in those depths cruelties beyond description. Of her elder sister,

forced unto her forlorn fate: to be thrown out of hand into some pit—as a blackened and blighted corpse.

Nay.

My heart was *yet* uncalmed, my nerves *yet* full-frayed, my mind *yet* a mire. In truth, *never* had I actually recovered from the whelm of wounding my own sister. A moment of meandering, enough to steal my eyes and wits away from the battle at hand.

A newly embarked path, fogging over afore Rolf the fledgeling renegade. Shame, indeed. And an affront to Mia, were she to see me now.

And a chance for Felicia.

“Hha!!” I gasped. My fit of hesitation had yielded her precious time: turning to her now, I found her freshly finished from preparing her next spell.

One might wonder, what ensues after a free moment given to a conjurer of her calibre? The answer was mine to know... and rue.

“Kōkūtós!!”

“Mnh!?”

No!

Felicia—a hand from hell she’s played!

And now, a great cerulean cell—cincturing me from all sides!

All was subsumed in blue.

I'd been snared.

...Completely and utterly severed from the outside world.

“——*kh!!*”

No time for thoughts.

No time to choose.

My fey body bent forth. My failing blade flourished.

—*Gshanngh!*

Through a facet of the cell the soot-steel stabbed, collapsing the cubic construction straightway.

“*Ggha... hhakh...!*”

Freed from purgatory, I, too, collapsed onto my knees, barely bearing myself up with the support of my sword.

From the time the spell had sprung till my escape, naught more than a slice of a second had passed. Yet it well-felt an eternity.

Kōkūtós: the most supreme of the freezing magicks. A spell to envelope a victim, and in its infernal space, cease

and suffocate all living force found within. A prison carrying out the sole and swift sentence of death... one the *svortaskan* had more swiftly acquitted me from.

But I was not fled without foulness. The instant the cell was erected, its wiles were already at work.

And so I was injured.

My every limb, my every bone, my every organ—taken right to Death's door.

————— ∴ —————

Heavy.

Numb.

The weight of a thousand wounds unseen.

How alluring the earth looked.

Like a cool bed after a day's labour.

Or a warm grave after a wintry life.

But still.

Still I clung to my sword.

"I... I see... Bites that bitterly, does it?" so wheezed my words. "No account recalls... any soul surviving... the *Kōkūtós*... Not till today... A precious precedent, wouldn't you say...?"

A pained play at composure as I surveyed the violence wrought upon me. I then forced my gaze forward might and main, only to find Felicia standing fallowed of all wit.

“Ah.... a-aah...” she murmured, lost and lorn-like.

“...Felicia,” I called to her.

“Br... Brother... I... I’ve tried... to k... ki... Br...”

“Felicia...!” I called again, still bent and buckled on my knees. Straining my eyes, I peered upon her face, watching it well up with pallour. Incanting the Kōkūtós surely must’ve drained her dry by now, but such was not the sole weariness sallowing her. No, for that selfsame spell was a death-magick, conjured by Felicia upon her own brother. Attempted fratricide, then, seemed the ghastlier ghost haunting her hale.

“Wh... why...? I... I only...” she mumbled on, void of all volition for further battle. To hail her out of concern, vulnerable foe that she was, might’ve amounted to another betrayal on my part, but none of that mattered—now more than ever did my sister need her brother.

“Felicia, listen to me...!” I cried once more, whereupon she twitched and turned my way.

“...Brother...?” Felicia responded weakly, almost in a whisper. “What... what’ve I...?”

“You’ve done no wrong,” I assured her. “Fight, Felicia. *Fight!* For all you’ve sworn to protect!”

That’s right. Between us was not some debate to decide whose was the errant path, for cause and creed both were

what had brought us to this battlefield. Wagers of war, we and all, forced to follow through on our dearest beliefs.

Or die in the endeavour.

“B... but... y...”

I shook my head. “...No, Felicia. It’s not to be... Would that we each could forge a future together, hand-in-hand. With our neighbours, our brethren... our beloved. But... it’s a sad thing, truly, that such fortune ill-finds every soul.”

Words awakening in Felicia a frigid shiver. Her face twisted with lament; her lips blanched from all blush.

“Yet souls we remain... carrying each our own creed, our own conviction,” I continued. “Thus in daring our destiny must we face our fate... We must fight—*each other.*”

“I... I...!!” Felicia quiveringly cried, tears coursing down her cheeks. Seeing it now, hers was a face most fair, even when wilted with woe.

How proud I was, to have a sister so abundant in beauty.

How pained I was, to be the brother breaking it all to pieces.

“I was ever yours...! Ever yearful, ever yearning...! But so asudden...! So asudden... did you stop being my dear Brother...! The Brother I wanted! The Brother I needed! You took him away from me!!”

Felicia, weeping and wailing. Many winters of fettered feelings, now taking wing.

“Always...! Always... have I... you...! Ever... ever and always...!” she went on brokenly. “...Yet... *and yet!!*”

“Yet forge ahead we must. Fight we must,” I returned, rising to my feet. “...Felicia. We are foes now... You and I!”

“Aaaa——ah!!”

My sister’s soaring scream—

—answered now by a storm of ody.

Sweeps and swirls of armillary magick all around her, unto whom then collected and coalesced many columns of blood-black levin. Stinging and snapping, raging and roaring: throes of thunder rupturing earth and air alike.

At such a sight my eyes widened. “This levin...”

Waving forth: my sister’s silverstaff. Behind its grim glimmer: a mournful glower. “If my foe you shall be... then...! Then *be no more!!*”

Frīgidus Ensis, Kōkūtós—two spells that’d earned my every awe. Yet here and now was Felicia daring a deadlier height. Lightning flaming lightlessly—a first to my eyes, but not a doubt to my mind: afore me was a magick nigh-unmastered by any in all the reaches of this realm.

Felicia then loosed another scream, as though to settle my suspicions. A scream drowning in tears, retelling the tantrums of her littlest years:

“Igniēns ĩcendō!!”



Unto her silverstaff: a convergence of the raven-red levin.

Fired new from its silver head: an endless length of lancing heat.

Igniēns Īcendō—a magick marking the foe's flesh and laying forth an ineluctable trajectory. Riding upon that path: a levin-line, sent with such speed so as to pierce through its prey with absolute certainty. Doggedly does it seek. Deathly does it strike. A spell suffering no escapee, no matter the distance, no matter the defence.

I quickened my thoughts. Time tarried. In that stilled instance played the vying of our minds, the next move whereof would reckon both victor and vanquished. I knew my hand; what of Felicia's?

My stare turned to hers, to read the heart hid behind that ruby-red regard. And there, I saw it at once.

Willfulness. Unwillingness.

Half-steeled. Full-sorrowed.

A fight unforsakable. A fight unfinishable.

There she stood, aface the proverbial crossroads, anguishing in indecision, torn betwixt duty and desire. And in espying her despair did I know her designs: it was not my head nor my heart that her spell sought to extinguish. And neither was it any of my limbs, for in sundering just one would bring no clean end to this fight yet.

No.

Where she'd aimed... was my abdomen.

Back from my thoughts I thundered.

Springing to me: a spear of screaming Light.

Sweeping afore me: the sword of severing Dark—

—swung to a speed more desperate and defiant than all
I've dared in my life.



—*Vhaaahhng!!*

Such a shriek shot through the air. And with it, tufts and tendrils of sanguine-black odyl, fanning out in a fading flower-bloom from the meeting of metal and magick. In the wake of the sword-sweep was silken soot, feathering about in ribbons and rivulets.

And so was vanquished the unavoidable magick.

“Gegh...!” I groaned, faltering against the gravity of the all-body pain. Still, I endured it and stayed astood. But this was grim. Fatally so. Already I’d taken too many wounds from the Kōkūtós, none visible to the naked eye: my flesh, my organs, my bones—all of them were marred. Recuperation required time, but time was up: Felicia’s next spell would speak my end.

Yet, only silence hung.

Wending my wavering vision to my sister, I found her trembling uncontrolled.

“A... aa...” she breathed in broken gasps. Was it despair? At having her champion magick unmade afore her very eyes? Or was it indignance? At her faithful forte failing at every turn?

Nay. It was both...

“Gh... agh... gohokh...!”

...and one more.

Felicia had foundered full to the ground, and was now gripped by a fit of vomiting—a symptom of being sapped asudden of all odyl. What I'd thought was an impossibility was here on full display: Felicia's unfathomable prowess, spent to the last drop.

Had she more to her mettle than just magicks, had she honed her craft even a mite more sharply... and had she been any less the sister I've always known, then this vie might've veered a different course. Indeed, were her words and spellweaving more wiley, certainly could she've caught me in some magicked cunning, with the wrath-red levin having long blasted a void through my belly.

“Aubh... bwahohh...!”

Yet her miring emotions had got the best of her: unbolstered and unembellished was her Igniēns Īcendō. Thus was I able to answer it in full. An outcome perhaps exacted by our experiences, our paths, once so inseparable, now sundered all those winters ago.

Still, the more grievous wounds were found in my flesh, not Felicia's. If not yet would she yield, then this hour would be my last...

“Hha... khahahh...!”

Gently did the curtains close. More so than I could have imagined.

With labour and languor, Felicia dragged herself up to her feet...

...

..

.

..

...

...and turned away.

Away, to totteringly flee our blood-feud. Away from this fraught fight, where her magicks had been maimed, her odyll spent unto deficit. A brigadier of the Order, broken in battle, soiled and sallowed, slowly receding into the distance.

“Felicia...” I whispered, watching my once-dear sister in pitiable retreat. Forth went a foot of mine. To find her. To follow her. But my body sooner slumped to the dirt, too weighed down by its wounds. What weakness. And yet... what relief.

Relief dirtied with doubt.

Doubt for myself. Doubt for my resolve.

After desperately defying the twenty blades of the Frīgidus Ensis had I closed the distance and dealt a wound upon my sister.

A mere shallow, skin-shearing wound.

But was I truly desperate?

Too desperate to full-brandish the blackblade?

A whole score of airborne daggers had I to answer, sure. But reflecting on it, I did not think myself so hard-put at that

time.

Something... somewhere in me had stayed my hand. Some part of me, too pained at the thought of slaying my own sister. If not for it, would my blade have broken more deeply into Felicia's flesh?

And found a heart to hew?

"...A trembling traitor. A second-guessing alga... Is that all you are?"

A question, quietly and cuttingly directed at myself, as I stared at Felicia fading from all view.

———— ∴ ————

The main gate laid in ruin. Deep had our flood of braves poured into the concentration camp. The violence had spilt thence unto the open baileys, whereupon did we continue to this moment our bitter vie with the Fiefguard and their Zaharte brothers.

"Fräulein!" called one of my braves to me. "We've secured the wounded!"

"Good!" I answered above the din of combat. "We rally now! All of you, together with Staffel Seven!"

Amidst my hest-giving, the air yonder cracked from an irruption of laughter, wild and bloodthirsted. Stamping next through the warring crush was its source: a bull of a Man,

clenching fast in his gauntlets a halberd, long and thrice-bladed.

“I founds ye, me dainty dark-sow!” he taunted, eyes hooked to me. “Come! Us dance’s not done yet!”

“Who’s a sow...!?” I muttered. Unimaginative be Men with their insults for my folk. Yet “dark-sow” was a first to these ears of mine, and young frau that I was, the slight pricked too deep into the nerves. An answer was in order, one to remind him who’s the swine for true—mayhaps with a kick to his snout!

“Ye’ll be squealin’ soon ‘nough! When I skins that there ‘ide o’ yers!” he croaked on, gaining upon me with hulking strides.

“*Tch!*” Biting my lip, I readied my two longdaggers once more.

A sore to admit, but though I craved much his downfall, this Man was proving too hard a boulder to crack. And not only he—by all accounts, our number ought hold the advantage, but ‘twas in grappling with these coin-Men of Zaharte that our momentum had begun to flag.

This halberdier in particular; his might I reckoned two—nay, *fourfold* more daunting than his comrades’. With but a swing of his three-faced weapon could he mow in twain many bodies at once, armoured or no. And should those bodies be ours...

I shudder to think. And thus had I challenged the Mennish fiend himself, to leash his eyes away from the braves.

“Yyah!!” I shouted, as ill-awaiting his arrival, I bolted forth with my longdaggers, both blades speeding to his neck. But right before they gained their mark, I was forestalled, as up swept next the head of the halberd.

“Rrryaah!” the Man howled, unshrunk by my evasion, for why I found out soon enough—the halberd’s shaft-butt followed, whipping up and striking me square under the chin.

“Aegh!” I reeled back, my vision trembling wild. Yet my body recouped at once, leaping back by its own will and escaping bare the second stroke of the halberd. Earth was axed. Dust blasted. Behind the fuming air cackled the halberdier.

“Tricky trotters you’ve got there, eh mirk-swine!? A nigh shame t’shear ‘em off!”

“Gh...!” I scowled back. No doubt was in me now. Smirking mad afore me was none other than “Ulrik”, high member of Zaharte and Sigmund’s former battle-brother.

With excitement had our witnessing braves recounted it: yesternight’s deadly dance anear the gates of Arbel. Of how, against evil odds, Rolf had left both Sigmund sundered of blade and Ulrik slashed of bosom. If not for their friends’ swift rescue, ‘twas most certain that the duo were half-eaten carrion by this hour. Such was our braves’ unanimous conclusion, but in my ears, it sounded more a fancy.

For how had Rolf done it? How had he kept at bay the two dreadnaughts? And not least cornered them to the verge of defeat? Try as I might, I could not guess; vying with but one of them was proving a fey struggle in itself, for this Ulrik had thus far bared no vulnerability that my eyes could

scry. Indeed, yet again was I reminded in full what mountainous prowess there lived in Rolf.

Yet I dared not drowse in his shadow forever. And neither could I dare falter against an enemy whom he'd handled with divided mettle. No. I could not fail here. I could not. Too much weighed upon these shoulders. Too much expectation. Too much hope.

Child to a jarl though I was, never was I certain to someday sit upon the high seat. Still, in me my people felt much the same fire as my father's. Burning fiercest was my arm and mind for battle, a talent apparent since my earliest springs and praised for just as long.

But as a blossoming frau, never could I receive such war-like words with any real gladness. They instead reminded me of my place, my duty, my solemn honour as daughter to the jarl of the Vílungen.

Faces, on one day aglow with expectation and pride; on another, dead-tense in the heat of battle. The faces of Berta, Volker, and many more—all whom I held dear, all who'd long minded me and kept me on the rightwise path... each and every one of them were embroiled in this eternal war that I might thrive in safety, that the meeker of our folk might know some relief from the daily threats at our door.

Their struggles, their sacrifices—none could I baulk.

Our home, our dear ones—none I wished to lose.

Thus had I chosen to put my talents to use and fight alongside my battle-brethren. From skirmishes to campaigns, wheresoever my blades were needed, I went. To the banks of the Erbelde, too, had I marched, but 'twas there that lightning had struck upon me.

A thunderbolt of a Man, wielding a sword no less swift... to outspeed my own daggers, the fleetness whereof I'd long thought was unanswerable. To my eyes, that flashing blade of his was more than some threat: 'twas a shot of sunlight, a spark for my awakening, most true.

Many other Men in that campaign could've boasted of more decorations and storied mettle, not least Londosius' paragon herself, the sword-maiden Estelle Tiselius, to whom droves of our number had we lost. But all my mind was paid instead to this one Man. For though he was sullied and bruised, cut-up and ablood all over; for though his bones were fain to buckle and his sinews begged for respite... he yet stood, baring his steel and handing me my defeat.

Harsh was this enlightenment. To the shallowness of my resolve. To the heights I had yet to endeavour. To the cruelty of this world, where one could scarce protect aught without mastering such depths and summits of discipline.

And so I gave myself to it. All of it.

For three years on, I relented not in honing my skill, tempering myself with such focus of mind that before long was I deemed fit to lead a *Gewölbe* of my own. Yet, 'twas not enough. For those same three years saw that Man whetted to a keenness far beyond my imagining. The gap of capability, gaping wider now than even before. Such I'd on the night of our reunion. Such I'd felt as Rolf risked life and limb to deliver my people.

Envy was alive in me. Yet in envy I could not dwell; too little time there was for it in the five days since our re-meeting.

...A mere five days.

The defeat of the hundred-score sackers at Hensen.

The bloodless capture of Balasthea.

The deception and culling of Arbel's defenders.

The breaching of the fief-burgh.

And now, this fatal battle, waged against the remnant Fiefguard after the unexpected death of their lord.

All in only *five* days.

Ström, verging on tearing away from the weave of Londosius: a watershed victory, once but a dream teased by centuries of struggle, now nigh-attained by a week's end. Indeed none amongst us could've thought any of this possible, not as we were before these fateful five days. But upon Rolf joining our cause, so asudden were the wheels set into motion.

Against this war was he set. To end it. To defeat Londosius itself. More than aught, I wished not to be left from his great endeavour. No, I wanted to join my hands with his, to help deal the realm-felling stroke, to usher in the long-awaited dawn for my long-shadowed people.

I had Berta's memory, too, to consider. When that second mother of mine lost herself in sacrifice, when the last moment of her life was nearing its end, in her fading eyes did I see some great task meant for me. Knowing Berta, 'twas this, no doubt: her little children—she'd bade me save them.

Then saved they shall be.

Their futures, assured. This war, ended.

But to cut the new path, I must be more than I am.

I must be resolute...

I must be steeled!

Ready to see all my promises to their ends!

Ready to lead the charge! To fight till my last breath!

Filled with the fires of determination, I flourished my blades, and with a mighty swing, thrust and threw them straight at my foe.

Ulrik's eyes flashed wide. "*Nm!?*"

But to my annoyance, his mettle remained unmarred: heaving the haft of his long halberd, he thwarted my thrown blades—*kha-khakhnn!*—and sent them flying clear up into the air.

"Hah!" he snorted in triumph. But his eyes had scried not the third blade thrown.

A blade—

—by the name of Lise!

I lunged and leapt forth to the level of his eyes, seeing them flashing again with surprise at the sight of this "dark-sow" in flight. Instinct ignited him as he thrust his halberd at once, but by then had I already flown past its many-bladed head. Snatching swift the haft, I pulled myself further forth—

"Gwabfh!?"

—to bring these "tricky trotters" crashing into his countenance.

A dropkick, reckless beyond all reason.

In that instant, I felt upon my heels the crunching collapse of Ulrik's nose. Back he bent, crashing down unto the dirt as blood blew from his nostrils. I mounted him straightway, and snatching one of my blades out of its fall — "*Haa—h!!*"—dove its keen point through Ulrik's heart.

—*Dhkharh!*

Deep it delved, down through the Man's body, nailing him to the earth as an effigy to the altar.

"*Ghukkhh...!*" he gagged, spewing blood and staining my cheeks. "*...Ngh... hhaa...*"

One final effort from his lungs, and at last all strength left his hands. With a thump, his long-trusty halberd fell out of his grip to rest upon the dirt. His eyes twitched in their sockets as they stared on and on at mine, whilst his jaws quivered, as though in attempt to give air to his last words. But failing, he choked on his blood... and gave his spirit to the winds.

Witnessing his end, I drew myself up to my feet and wiped the wet red from my cheeks. A moment, and there next swelled roaring cheer.

"He's slain! The hireling's slain! A feat by our Fräulein!"

"Praise be to her prowess!"

"She flew like a butterfly! Stung like a buffalo!"

That last line, I should remember. And the face besides that dared it.

Looking all along the battle about me, I sighted more of the Zaharte hirelings. But what a gladness, that our braves had held fast to wiser tactics, engaging the sellswords with many against one. And by my reckoning, no more foes of Ulrik's equal ought yet remain here—this battle, then, was on its last throes. What was left were the captives' extraction... and the enemy commanders sitting in their perch: the siblings Viola and Theodor, themselves the greatest threat on this battlefield.

Not by my present mettle could I fell those two. No, just Ulrik had me close enough to Death's door. But I fretted little. For hunting them down now was an ally of ours, whose own mettle was skies above my own.

We shall win this, then.

Win, and on this day, see new-changed the course of history.

But tarrying now will bring it no closer. Driven by the thought, I turned back to the battle at hand, ready to show my dawning resolve.

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The body crumpled. Dust sprang. Redness seeped. Struck by the felling of one of their own, the four other Fiefguardsmen turned to the offender—and once-thought ally. Their voices vaulted.

“W... wot's th'meanin' o' this!?”

“Ye’ve sold yer sword t’the wrong side, ‘ireling! A backstabbin’ this is! ‘Gainst Crown an’ Country both!”

Sigmund spat in response. “I ain’t the dagger-man ‘ere!” he thundered in defiance. Then, thumping his chest, “Your *Crown an’ Country’s* wot’s done the stabbin’! An’ they’ve stab’d the *wrong back!*”

The pinnacle of pride, to so brand one’s birthland the sooner knifer. Holst could but hang his jaw in disbelief as he witnessed the warring words... and the weapons that danced thereafter.

“Die, traitor!!”

Unto Sigmund then sprang the Fiefguardsmen, like hounds loosed upon a lone prey.

Holst jolted at the sight. “No...!”

They were close—*too* close! Five were encircling Sigmund the instant he had entered the scene; four now thanks to his ambush, but that was no comfort. Falchions next fell upon him from every direction. *Too late*, thought Holst, but his body judged otherwise as, against all prudence, it sped desperately to avail this sudden ally.

But in a blink—“*Fwegh!?*”—spewed a yelp, yielded by a Fiefguardsman. Hammering into the soldier’s face was the hilt of Sigmund’s sword; crushed was his nose, shattered were his teeth, as to the ground he fell and fainted. And yet the violence was hardly finished, for that same sword had already found new flesh for its feast.

“*Khraagh!?*” came the next scream from a now crumpling corpse.

He had been well-surrounded, Sigmund. But a mere second, and he had hewn the danger down to half. Such fleet fury affrighted the remnant foes, stopping them in their tracks. Sigmund seized the moment and let loose another lunge of his sword.

"Rrruaahh!" he roared, full-rending another Fiefguardsmen.

In desperation, or perhaps some half-hearted vengeance, the very last foe-blade plunged down upon Sigmund's side. And so up soared his own to slap it away, before galing down to gore through his final mark.

"Khagh...!" Thus expired the last of the waylayers; thus ended the flash of a fight. Five Fiefguardsmen, made as meal for the worms in a wisp of a moment.

Frantically had Holst offered his succour, but it had proved a fool's errand. So soon was the victory, so daunting the strength on display, that he was left standing speechless. Still, before he could blush from his blunder, Holst found himself pierced by an epiphany.

Indeed it was succour that he had offered.

Yet to whom but Sigmund.

A son of *Man*.

"Tch!" so struck that son's tongue; pity—teetering on indignance—darkened his eyes. He looked all through the escapees, finding not few of them to be: "...Gammers an' gaffers, innit..." he ruesomely muttered. "...Bloody 'ell."

Sigmund then pointed his thumb aback at the unbarred gate. Seeing his signal, the braves and captives both began

moving at once. But as he watched them, the sword-for-hire noticed something amiss.

Stopping Holst amidst the fleeing file, he cried, “Oi! Where’s that Rolf Bug-muncher gone, ah?”

“B-bug...? H-he fights, if you wonder,” the Staffelhaupter answered, half-confused for a moment. “Mighty marks remain amongst the enemy yet. Rolf faces one of them as we speak.”

Marks mighty and more; in speaking of them did Holst recall the young sorceress who had been standing in wait outside the bastille. Her conduct, her confidence... a glimpse of her and he knew at once: she was *not* to be trifled with. Equally so with the Östberg siblings, who were as yet unencountered and uncontested. Indeed, upon this battlefield there still prowled foes most formidable, but whose living breaths were a barrier to the Nafílim cause.

“Hmph,” Sigmund scoffed, content. “Good.”

“You mean to aid him?” Holst asked in turn, and nigh-naturally, at that. But of course he did, for he now saw in Sigmund an ally—and as well, a saviour. Of the boy to be sacrificed, of the braves and captives here; a Man risking life and livelihood for whom but the *nemeses* of his realm—the same realm against which now burned his flame of rebellion.

“Hah! That bull o’ a blade needs no ‘and-’oldin’!” snorted Sigmund, recalling the ungraced. “Well, methinks, at least.”

“...I see.”

Holst felt then some relief. The reason: this same Sigmund had once measured swords with Rolf. And so surely must he know well of Rolf's prowess. After all, songs of clashing steel oft reveal of the wielders what words cannot.

Regardless, Rolf's battle with the sorceress was naught the Staffelhaupter himself could avail. But just as the wolfsteel warrior had his own task to tackle, so did Holst, one now nearing completion: with "help" from his late brother, the captives were secured and in tow. All that was left was to quit the camp and leave the rest of the battle to the Nafílim army.

Spurred by the thought, Holst then hurried after the others, but before a foot of his could fall, a stampede rumbled anew in the distance. His ears pricked, his stomach turned—more Fiefguardsmen were on the way.

"Come back 'ere, ye curs!" This, and many like lines littered the air as filing fast from the bastille precinct were fresh pursuers. Eight was their count, each with eyes bloodshot from sheer foeship.

"They're many, Herr Holst! Over-many!" warned a brave.

"Away at once! All of you!" Holst commanded.

To safety must these captives be escorted. Only, safety was nowhere in sight, not even in Sigmund's shadow, not even far beyond the service gate where other allies stood in wait, ready to receive them. No, these chasers wanted the captives dead, and *only* dead, and seemed all too fain to follow it through to a bitter end. Even from afar, such intent was evident on their mad mien.

And so must they be stopped. Shouldering the shepherd's charge, Holst turned away.

"I'll hold them off," he declared, and faced the fast-approaching Fiefguard. But as though to steal his thunder, now eclipsing his view of them was Sigmund, stepping brazenly forth.

"No you won't," said the mercenary. "Get shoggin'. These cullions're *mine* to cut."

Compelled by his conviction, the other braves quickly rounded up the cowed captives and began their way to the service gate. In their departure, not few from the group offered timid thanks to the thunderfall of a Man. Holst remained, watching Sigmund's figure in silence.

Seeing their Staffelhaupt stolid, one of the braves pressed him, "Herr! We've no time!"

"Indeed we haven't..." Holst said at last, before turning a glance to his comrades. "...The captives, I leave in your care."

"...What!?"

The other braves gaped, but their leader was set. Holst ventured forth his own steps, and there stood beside Sigmund.

To which up bent a brow of the brute. "Mate. They're *mine*, I said."

"That you did. And that they are. Still..."

Still were the foes superior in number. Still was ill-faded the fates' humour. And should their dice fall to Sigmund's

woe...

...then must I offer him the saving throw—my sword!

Something, somewhere deep in Holst's heart, roused those very words.

He had thought of it mere moments before, that not all Men deserved disdain. Such Men as Rolf. Such Men... as Sigmund. Verily had the mercenary wagered his life for the braves and their charges. And verily had Holst hastened to aid him—to aid a *Man*.

In this very moment was something stirring in the Staffelhaupt's soul. Something dear, something precious beyond all price. A sprout, neither to be neglected nor crushed afoot. No, it was to be cherished and nurtured strong. Holst knew this not. He saw this not. But he sensed it nonetheless. And that was enough.

Enough to spur his steps to the fray and unfurl his newfound resolve.

"...This sword might avail you yet, son of Man."

Eyes and words unclouded. Blade and body unquivering. Met with such a mien, Sigmund could but grin.

"Hmph," he huffed. "Big ballocks you've got, mate."

'That you do, Brother.'

So echoed a voice in Holst's ears.

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A dozen laid dead about me.

Fiefguardsmen, mercenaries—their blood running off my blade.

This vicinity's defences had proven dense enough. No doubt, then, that anear loomed their highest leaders. Thinking of them, I trained my eyes up to their possible perch: the top of the watchtower.

What wounds the Kōkūtós had wrought upon me yet remained, but were mended enough to endeavour combat. And so, trusting my braves with their duty in the bastille, I had taken it upon myself to steal further into this foe-den and seek out the Zaharte commanders.

Viola and Theodor Östberg—their undoing should serve the headstones to this battle, and by all means must I have them hewn. As though to answer my conviction, afore me appeared the siblings themselves: vernal in visage and vigour, descending the tower with leisurely steps. It seemed they meant to welcome my arrival—with spears glinting in their grips.

“Swift comes the storm, I see,” so resounded the sister's voice. “Welcome, withersake. You behold afore you the twin heads of Zaharte: Viola myself, and my brother, Theodor. What say you before you are no more?”

“I say: a pleasure, this meeting,” I answered, “and an honour besides—to finally cross blades with you both.”

No lie was upon my lips. Any warfaring soul ought know of these two, and so was this momentous meeting truly a treasure to a wayside soldier as I.

A pity that it would be our last.

— VI —

The Östbergs.

Down the watchtower steps they wended. Strength seemed to strum in their very strut.

“But I would first know your will,” I shouted to them from below, bearing my voice above the distant din of battle. “You’ll not sue for your safe surrender, I take it? To lay down your arms aside your slain, who number now half your failing host?”

Such I asked of the sister, whose sliding gauntlet upon the railing roused a ringing hiss through the air.

“You take aright,” she answered. “Half a host is quite the bargain for that head of yours.”

“One to be plated and served before Central, no doubt,” I guessed with narrowed gaze, earning a faint smile from the Zaharte captain as she alighted upon firm ground.

“The prey knows his plight,” she remarked. “How—”

Viola’s words vanished.

Air whooshed; her form, too, was gone.

Blurring unto my bosom now was a hawk-speed spearhead, like a limb of levin, in an instant traversing a stretch of many strides.

Bringing my blackblade in, I guarded against the bald ambush, extinguishing its odyl withal and swinging back in answer... only, I didn't. Such was Viola's desire, her very her tactic: to tempt my defence and thin my thoughts from Theodor, who would surely wind about to spear me from behind. Nay, espying their deception, I dared a different answer altogether.

"Hhet!" I twisted my torso, letting Viola's thunderswift thrust pass through where my breast had been. But the sudden spear was too precise—in its wake splashed a plume of sparks as its enwreathing odyl ran across my breastplate, gashing open the metal and grazing my flesh beneath.

But I merely winced; this was a wound well-accounted for. Straightway I shot past Viola's side and assailed Theodor, who trailed just behind his sister.

"Mn!?" he gasped, eyes wide.

Glimpsing my low-stanced sword, Theodor jerked and leapt clear away at once. Viola followed the instant after, and soon were the siblings reunited, their spears and battle-spirits re-poised. Had the brother committed instead, fully would he've reaped a reprisal from my blade, but alas, both he and his sister had proven that their fame was no fluke.

"Our mark moves well, Sis. *Too* well..." the Östberg brother muttered. The grin on his lips was gone; many men would've bitten Viola's bait, only to find Theodor's spear sprouting out of their bosoms. That such did not come to pass here seemed to have piqued their caution.

"A hart, holding his own against hunters as honed as we. Fancy that," Viola said to me. "Or might you be a hunter yourself? Long on the trail for *our* heads?"

“The predator doubts her odds,” I retorted. “How—”

Now was it my words that vanished—or were stolen, rather, as speeding unto me once more was Viola, her spear intent upon a lower mark: my thigh. A different target, a different tactic, likely to lure out my side-retreat instead and set Theodor to waylay the very landing.

And so for the instant, I stood my ground and swatted away the sister-spear before bounding back by many paces. Thwarted, Theodor ceased his charge with a stamp, his surprise most apparent even from behind his sibling.

“Sis, I daresay he’s studied our spears,” he doubted again.

But Viola shook her head. “Nay, I say he scries them. An eagle-eyed wolf we’ve welcomed to our den.”

In addressing her brother’s worries did Viola’s visage then shift unto full sharpness—the glare of a lioness. Down low she bent, as about her spear shaft clenched fingers fain for the hunt. Then, parting her lips, she drew a gentle breath and uttered:

“Rugiēns Tempestās.”

Viola’s voice: clear as crystal.

Her spear: the eye of a storm.

The air whipped as razor winds raged and whistled asudden about her weapon. Plumes of dust were lifted and sucked into the vortex, nigh-veiling the spear in a formless sheath; the work of an aeolian ensorcellment, moulding a mundane polearm into an all-pulverising maelstrom—a madness of magick, mastered by masterful hands.

“*Hhyah!!*” Viola cried, thrusting forth her tempest-spear whence she stood. From the motion, the maelstrom shrieked and streamed in a twisting stampede, great in size and grinding away the earth as it went. In my direction, it blasted. In my eyes, it ballooned.

“*Heagh!*” I full-heaved my body to bound aside, saving myself from the screaming, slashing cyclone—only to be beset by a thrust from Theodor’s spear.

—*Kkhangg!*

So rang our vying arms, barely audible above the violence of Viola’s vortex.

“A wolf, for certain...!” her brother seethed, gnashing his teeth at my timely defence. Though timely only by a bare margin, for in Theodor, too, was a change: now was his speed a world apart, no doubt amplified by the miracles of his own magicks.

But our exchange lasted not long; the winds wailed again to greater volumes. Theodor then vanished right from my eyes. In his absence: another squall of blustering blades, headed right my way. I fled the fury again with as long a leap as I could muster, only to be ambushed by the Östberg brother once more.

“*Ssyet!*” he rasped, his spear lunging as I landed.

Frowning, I fended off the attack, “Stubborn—”, and followed with a blade brandished from below, “—much!?”

Dust and soot sprang in the *svørtaskan*’s slashing wake, only to be blown away by the ambient gusts—within which my mark was nowhere to be found. No, yonder he stood, having fled the instant his offence had failed. A textbook

example of a hit-and-run, but executed to extraordinary speed.

This seemed their style, of how the heads of Zaharte hunt their hares: Viola's hand was the hound, loosed to lead the target into Theodor's deathtrap of a spear-charge. From the outset was this so. Only now was it revealed to its full and frightful fury, frustrated by an over-elusive prey... or impelled by what prestige my decapitated head would requite them.

"...My storm, your spear—with skill he skirts both," Viola remarked to her brother, having joined him anew. "Rare in this realm, his mettle."

Rarer still was their cutthroat cohesion, I'd say. Waste-laying winds, lightning-speed spears—like a true storm did brother and sister strike. And the one tasked to its stilling: this lone and yet-wounded swordsman. What was *he* to do?

When pounced by a pack, strike first the chief, as they say. By all accounts, Viola fit the bill. Hers was the baton conducting this combat's rhythm. If I could wrest it from her, then much advantage would be mine. Only, there were twisters wielded betwixt us, and such a deathly distance I dared not cross, for "deathly" was no exaggeration: her maelstroms showed clear the sheer potency of her magicks. A mistake here, and I would be ripped to ribbons.

Such was the problem. What of solutions? I knew of none yet, but a hint gave me hope enough: to attend Viola's wild winds and Theodor's fleet offence—simultaneously. And in due course might a chance present itself.

No jester would dare such a juggle. But already was I deep in the act, and any errant ball now would spell my swift death.

“A fine specimen of an opponent you are, Rolf Buckmann,” said Viola. “And a seldom opportunity besides, to unfurl our wings in full.”

“Would that you’ve taken me yet for a timid ungraced,” I said back, “then such a sweat would I not’ve shed.”

“Oh?” Her smile slanted up like a scytheblade. “Pity about that.”

A regard both recognising the might of her mark and reckoning the gruesome end she would surely wreak upon him. Most would know despair at this point. But in this tunnel, I spied a light. Or rather, a saving shadow, one held fast in my fingers: the soot-steeped piece to solve this puzzle.

For the siblings, all begins with the wicked winds spewed by Viola’s spear. Few are they who would dare challenge such a monstrous magick, but I counted myself not amongst that forlorn lot; cut the currents with the soot-steel, and they would be broken unto breezes. Then and there could I close the distance and vie for victory.

But neither Viola nor Theodor should be so naïve. They were seasoned wagers of war. It was their very livelihood, their very claim to fame. That I could undo magicks with but a swing of this sable sword ought be known to them by now. Indeed, their tactics seemed tailored to trounce the very trick. Play against the twister, and Theodor would surely be there to land the checkmate—at a speed and timing I could scarce answer, no less. In fact, likely it was that he’d been abiding the very move.

Then should I strike Theodor down first? Read *his* manoeuvres right back at him? And counter in the same instant he sets himself upon me? A princely ploy, but one

checked by his speed. Misjudge his rhythm even slightly and it's this heart that would be skewered through.

Right. Cool and calm, then. Keep the course. Watch the siblings. Seize the chance.

But as though to harry the very effort, attacking my ears again were the ghastly gusts—a third twister thundering in, likely to persuade out of me another side-escape.

And so I played along.

Holding the *svørtaskan* low, I leapt clear aside—

—and in the act, brandished the blackblade.

“*Hgh—!?*” Surprise flashed on Theodor’s face as he appeared right in the path of the sword-swing. Sensing success in that instant, I drove the dragonseared blade ever forth to fell the Östberg brother.

But then—

—*ffvwoohh!!*—

—blasting in was the fourth storm.

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No! The winds—wielded again *too soon!*

Surprise was now mine to savour; escaping here required sacrifice. But there was nothing for it: reining in my every sinew, I stopped the soot-steel from finding Theodor’s

flesh. All fighting form broken, I then threw myself away from the twister's warpath. Like a thousand whips, its currents licked and lashed as it blasted through, battering my body with the shockwaves wuthering in its wake.

Grit and gravel rained as I tumbled to a halt. Left bent on a knee, I glanced back, discovering a long gash hollowing the ground where I'd been set to seal Theodor's fate. But amidst the aftermath was the man himself nowhere to be seen. Struck by his absence, I leapt away once more and re-steeled myself for any coming surprise.

This was a foul turn. Never had I imagined Viola capable of *volleying* so monstrous a magick. "Sacrifice" indeed; had I tarried to fell Theodor, most surely would I have shared his grave. The thought alone wrung a cold sweat out of my back.

"Sorry, Sis."

There yonder: Theodor's voice as he appeared not in another ambush, but several paces from his sister.

"All well and fine," Viola answered with softness. "My storm is your shield, Theodor. Not on my watch will that sword of his seam your skin."

"That, I'll not doubt," her brother nodded.

More than ever did it cut clear: trussing these two was trust unshakable. Aught less would've made such coordinated combat an impossibility. The spearmanship of the Östberg siblings; far indeed did its fame ring throughout the realm, and not with any hollowness, either.

Viola's voice sounded again, wintry now to its former, sisterly warmth.

“You’re looking more the haggard hog, Rolf Buckmann. Lo, how your sweat shimmers,” she observed, bearing her spear as a hunter does afore a quailing quarry.

“What, this?” I said, aware again of my fatigue. “What man wouldn’t swelter? To see so fair a fox as yourself?”

“What man would dare so deftless a line?” she quipped, cold and undaunted. “Do try not too hard, cherry boy. Your gloze is glass.”

A stinging retort. And piercing withal in its truth: that line of mine was, in fact, a gamble of a gloze, a mask for my flagging mettle. Rolf the “haggard hog”, for certain, one wasted and wounded before even chancing this battle, no less.

But what of it? This was no spar, no display afore feasting princes and their fawning courtiers. A war this was; to hie into the fields of fighting yet full-hale is itself the seldom scenario.

‘Even should blade and bow be broken both, abandon not the stroke of hope.’

Such was writ in the martial manuals. And as “hope” would have it, here in my hands was the soot-steel—a blade not to be broken.

Yes. There was *hope* yet. But one to be wielded at haste, for to this moment were the braves of Hensen embroiled in battle.

Here, then. Here must my idle complaints end and the curtain call begin; another second’s delay dooms one more comrade to the coffin. If my strength is as a waning flame, then let it feed upon a new fuel: my very soul. Only then can

I cut these commanders down, and hew from them the dusk to this dire struggle.

"Hhaa..."

I exhaled; hot-headedness now would sooner find *me* hewn, instead. Thus I cooled my nerves amidst my full-kindled spirit, that I might better scry the thread so key in solving this skein. And in so doing, I found in that moment a flicker yet in my heart.

Up from the fathoms it flitted.

Then to my lips it lilted.

And through the air it fluttered, bearing a name well-known to my ears... and a red memory to my sword.

"...Felicia," I uttered at last. "...A handful she must've been, that sister of mine."

"...Ah. That's right," Viola almost sang. "So, had her wish fulfilled, has she, that Felicia? How heartwarming."

...What?

Viola's words.

Had I heard them awrong?

Or had Viola indeed aired something most amiss? *Silly*, even?

"And yet here her brother stands, defiant to his plight... and deaf to her pleas, I should imagine," the elder Östberg continued. "Tell me. Whatever happened to that poor girl?"

..."Whatever happened"?

Was Viola truly dim to what had transpired between Felicia and myself?

Was such a thing *possible*?

The Östberg siblings; high upon the watchtower were they perched, all through the course of the day's battle. How, then, could they not've gleaned so fraught a familial fray, if even for a moment?

...Nay. The possibility was there, that our duel had been but a wood in the forest; however broad the Östbergs' view of this great battle might've been, it rattled reason to expect even their eagle eyes to find every fight. Indeed, such was the sheer chaos that was now flooding through the camp. A chaos that had demanded their full mind in commanding their dying men. But was it demanding enough? *Distracting* enough? To have cast wax over their eyes and ears for any sight or sound of the Buckmanns' war-like bickering?

Yes... Thinking on it, Felicia and I had not fought for very long. No, not at all.

Our combat had escaped their ken—of this, more and more was I convinced. Or was convincing me in and of itself a card in their cunning hand?

This I could not scry. Clouds hung now over my own ken.

Mired in rumination within, I thought then to look without. To wit: at Viola. The meaning in her mien, the inquisitive quivering in her eyes, the rhythm in her respiration—at all of these I peered...

...and could espy from none the swindler's port.

Only one way to find out for certain, then.

Steeling my sinews and bracing my bosom, I...

“What matter now, my renegade?” she called, cocking her face slightly. “A muted mouth ill-makes a man more the charmer, you ought know—”

Once again were Viola’s words severed. But not by her own will: straight to her I shot, shouldering the soot-steel full-brazen.

“...hh!?” For an instant, her countenance cracked with confusion. My sudden offence seemed a fright upon her foresight—and a suicidal move to all eyes beholding, a prey hurrying into the hunter’s snare.

And so down the irons bit.

“*Hhyah!!*” Viola was a mercenary vaunted to high heaven. Never could she be taken aback for too long, nor deceived to much success. And so with all swiftness did her ensorcelled spear spring forth, unfettering the fifth storm in this fight. Billowing and bellowing, the bewitched winds whirled wildly my way.

Not once.

Not in the gate-breeching battle of yesternight. Not in the camp-capturing combat on this day. Not once had I sundered a spell, save all that Felicia had brought to bear against me.

Not once.

Sigmund and Ulrik, too, had I fought, sure. The swordsman’s cheek, the halberdier’s bosom—their flesh I’d

severed unstopped by the palings protecting them. But piercing palings was a common sight. Unmaking magicks? Not so.

The Östbergs, then, knew not what fangs this wolf hid.

Straight unto me stampeded the tempest, a whirlwind to whelm the wits and grind to mince any man it devoured, flesh, bone, and all.

But I fled not.

Charging ever forth unto Death's storm, I raised the weight of the wolfsteel off my shoulders, and from on high, heaved it down full-stroke.

—Fwghohh!

A sound of finality—the sole remains of the maelstrom as it settled instantly unto silence.

At such a sight, Östberg eyes widened.

The gamble of a guess proved a profit. Never had Viola taken my foolhardy charge to be aught more than just that. Never had she thought it in my power to still her storm. That such an act, of killing spells with but a cut of the sword, could beckon much bewilderment from a foe... such was the lifesaving lesson from my own sister.

Indeed, it was bewilderment that now manacled the Östbergs in place. But only for the barest mite of a moment.

That's right.

A mite of a moment, not much more than a blink.

Yet in that blink were they arrantly defenceless. A blink I did not let escape. Baffle their minds, unmake them in the while: the sword of surprise, swung to success... along with the soot-steel, as it arrived upon Viola's midst.

Blackness flashed.

Through my hands ran the rattle of mortality.

Of a blade burrowing through flesh.

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Blood leapt out of Viola's bosom.

To the ground she buckled, her knees striking the red-dappled dirt. And in that moment, a bare, quiet moment, she turned to her brother. There, a look was shared between them.

"...Th... dor... I... I'm..."

Quivering, quieting words, last upon the lips of Viola Östberg. Strength failing, she fell full upon the earth, limp fingers freeing her windless weapon.

...Ssheeeng!

Shooting in was another spearhead, set to stab me through. Twisting out of its way, I bounded clear back and took post far from its vengeful wielder. No follow-up came in pursuit. I soon understood why: his spear was less to pierce me dead, and more to remove me from his sister.

When next I saw him, Theodor was hunched over her unbreathing body. On and on he stared at her, blank and speechless. Yet no matter how long he looked, what was once shared a moment ago was now forever a memory.

“Hgh...” he grimaced, face graven with grief. A grief that then grew into a wild, wailing anger. *“...Nghaaa——ah!!”*

—Khsangh!

Sword and spear clashed.

Theodor appeared right afore my eyes, bearing down might and main upon the blade that had so savoured his sister’s blood. His face flashed wrath; pure spite was what had sped him unto me in the single blink. But driving away the joust, I dared an offence in turn.

—Khakhr! Khshanh!

Metals struck, shrill and shrieking. Sparks spat, bright and braying. Over and again, weapons pouncing and parrying. Along its course was Theodor’s skill on full and frenetic display, so much so that a lesser eye might’ve measured him not a master, but a man driven mad with misery. To mine, however, such could not be farther from the truth.

Ten trades, twenty—a crescendo of checks and challenges, the end whereof found us both famished for air. Breaking away in tandem, we then stared each other down, stealing glances here and there to survey again the span between us, all the while catching our breaths with due caution. I had much confidence in what my lungs could endure, reckoning them a summit above Theodor’s. Yet with magicks was the spearman’s body bolstered, and so did the

fight find us, heretic and hireling, equal in at least that respect.

"Hhah... haahh..." Theodor breathed as laboriously as I, brimming at the eyes with vengeance. And yet... "...A gamble," he soon said. "That's all battle is. A gamble wagering the greatest stakes. A gamble you've won... against my sister."

"..."

"Foeship poisons. Fury imprisons," he went on, cuttingly quiet. "Not on the battlefield do vices as these avail. This, my beloved Viola has oft said."

In uttering the name of his dearly departed, the bereaved brother bit his teeth with such force that all his face began to shudder. His hands, as well; gloved and gauntleted though they were, a glance could well-glean just how bitterly they wrung at his readied spear.

"...And yet!!" he cried, sudden as a lash of lightning. "How my veins *swell* with venom!! How my heart *howls* behind its bars!! Never to know solace till *yours* is run full-through, *Rolf Buckmann!!*"

Against such ire, my brows fell. "I know..." I said. "...I know."

Emotions erupting from within; a bosom thundering and throbbing so, that unbearable becomes the urge to scratch and rake away at it, flesh and feelings all, just for some semblance of solace—this, I've never lived for myself. But in living upon the battlefield did I come to know the existence of such a scouring experience—and the terrible toll it exacts.

“...*You?*” Theodor hissed, shaking his head. “You know *nothing!*”

A seething accusation followed by a fierce lunge. A fire was the fray once more.

‘You know nothing.’

The words cried deep into my core.

Indeed, never had I lost a loved one who so shared my blood. Why, I’d even made the very decision *to* lose them. Someday, somewhere—by my own hands, no less. Should needs demand it. Should the fates see it fit. Who am I, then, to *know* aught?

But I do know.

Of those that have suffered such loss as his. Of those that struggle on, day after day, despite the pain.

I do know.

I *have* to know.

For another choice was made: to walk alongside them and give mind to all their grief.

And so, Theodor.

I *know*.

“*Dyhhh!!!*” spiritedly sprang my cry as I brandished the black sword in kind. There did blade and point bite and peal, each dread-driven, each seeking to prove the worthier pain. The crack and crackle of combat, conducted once more to the horror of the very air as it shuddered at our every strike.

“Some witchery you wield, is it!?” Theodor screamed amidst his masterful spearmanship. “That so damns the odyl of my spear!? That so stilled my sister’s storm!?”

In want of some warrant for his guess, the Östberg brother’s eyes stabbed and studied my ensuing expression. A vain effort, for surely he knew how near he was to the mark; he had wits enough for it, as attested by the feats he’d shown me thus far. Or perhaps it was merely that he wished to hear the confession from the criminal’s lips.

“A gift, then! For the ungraced!” he shouted on. “Your *Inquisition!*”

A fey absence followed—the odyl girding his spear was now gone altogether. In its stead was a twice-cruel increase elsewhere: the further quickening of his offence and the infuriation of his strength. No doubt there was, then...

“Hwoo—oaahh!!”

...that every dew of odyl was now devoted wholly to bolstering his flesh.

Howling, Theodor battled anew with bedevilled desperation, his spear hacking and hasting more ravenously than ever before.

I fought back, barely keeping afloat above my surprise for my foe’s choice, a clear challenge to all conventions of combat as it was. Indeed, the weapon was what deserved odyl, not solely the sinews, lest the blade fail against a paling and punishment be meted in turn; a misery my own flesh recalled much too well.

All told, neither was I the conventional foe, nor this sword of soot a mundane threat. Theodor perhaps chose

aright, then. If his spear-odyl should die against every touch of the *svortaskan*, then better to bolster his body with the magicked might, and seek the killing strike all the more surely.

Still, to be so inspired to play so wayward a hand in the heat of battle... Certainly no easy feat, that. But such was the deed plainly on display.

"Heaaa—ahh!!" Louder still clapped his cries. More rapidly again lashed and lunged his snake-like spear. Overvied and overwhelmed, it was only a matter of time before my own blood should stain the scene.

"Ghegh!" I groaned as a graze gushed and shot across my shoulder. Between my own sword and my own sinews, I lost not in a contest of might. Indeed, a single blow of mine ought overpower any that Theodor himself could produce, body-emboldened or no. The rub rested in his rapidity: his spear was now striking sooner than I could answer.

But not only that. Hardly was he led about by such helter-skelter haste, as a master is overwhelmed by his unwieldy beast. No, Theodor was no meek master. With skill seldom seen was he reigning in his unruly speed to perfection, yielding a performance that matched most mete with his style of spearmanship.

Dwelling in defence here would earn me my doom. And so, readied against risk—*"Hhyet!!"*—I lurched and wrought forth a sweep of my blade.

—*Ghsseengh!*

A line of sparks spouted. The tip of the dragon-tempered sword sang—having but shallowly sheared across Theodor's cuirass.

No good. Too long was the length between us. A gap of half a pace protected him more surely than any armour could.

“Hateful hound! You hunger for more...!?” Theodor rasped as he recoiled. “Then you have it!”

From view he faded.

Right afore my eyes, a vanishing like a jester’s trick. Though not for long: far off he appeared again. But another instant found his spearpoint speeding to my throat.

“*Egh!?*” I gasped, guarding straightway against Theodor’s thunderflash offence before returning in kind a centrewise cut. But the blackblade bit naught, its too-nimble mark already in retreat to an unchallengeable distance. “What speed...!” I huffed, taken aback.

Theodor Östberg. Above all whom I’d made battle against, in all the years of my life, did he stand as the speediest—above even Lise herself. This was grim. Were he to commit to this tactic, of hitting and running with the agility of living levin, then his victory seemed all but certain.

“*Hyaaagh!*”

“*Ghegh!*”

And commit he did. Over and again, Theodor thundered in with a blurring thrust, only to then escape clear from the crime. The cruel continuation carved wound after wound out of me, each of which I’d only managed to avert from my vitals with a dogged defence. But, thoroughly thrashed as I was, not for much longer could I overlook my mounting loss of blood.

Yet the situation persisted, one so dire and deathly that even a simple blink of the eyes engendered much danger. Here and there darted my vision. Here and there dashed in his spear. A repetition of barely gleaning and barely guarding, my very life put on the line with every move.

“This wolf yet keeps his wits whetted...” Theodor hissed amidst a new lull in his lunges. “Rolf Buckmann! You’ve hid your fangs all too well!” From yonder he glowered, his face shadowed with a new shame. “Never have I feigned blindness for them. Never have I weighed your war-worth any lesser than its due. But now I see the veil masking my eyes! The deception skewing my scale...!”

Frayed with frustration, my foe clenched teeth and spear alike. His anger for his ungraced foe remained aglow as ever, but hounding him now, too, was anger for himself. Perhaps for making too light of this prey... only to pay the too-heavy price of his sister’s life.

“Likewise, Theodor,” I answered, haggard and hoarse. “Over-bright was your sister’s shine... to have so enshadowed the superior strength in her own brother—I ought’ve felled you first when I had the chance.”

Viola was whom I’d thought the deadlier threat. A thought earning now none of my thanks. No, it wasn’t Viola, but her own brother, Theodor Östberg, who rightfully held claim as the most affrighting beast upon this battlefield.

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“...A strength,” Theodor reflected, “superior to Sister’s? As I am now?” Together his lips pressed, as though to some pain. “...A beloved, lost. A strength, gained. This wound *wails*, Rolf Buckmann, when in so reckoning, you rub into it the salt of irony!”

“What irony, Theodor Östberg?” I returned. “That only torn from Viola could you attain to your potential? Or that you ill-see your soaring strength for what it truly is—a fitting sendoff for your dear sister?”

Viola’s creed had walked in lockstep with the cruelty that was Londosian canon. Why, she’d sacrifice a Nafílim child if it furthered her fortunes. And for that, I could feign no fellowship with her. For that, she full-deserved her defeat.

Still...

Still, to label her as little more than an enemy, some mere hurdle to be hewn, would’ve been blithe of me, or baleful, even. As I ought bear the blade of resolve in my hands, so I ought make of my eyes the clear mirrors of measure, that I might judge my enemy justly, and even vouch for any valour he has revealed. Lest I in turn fashion myself a foe deserving every profanity spat at me. Lest I lose my way and betray, too, the people to whom I’ve made my promises.

And so do I look to Viola Östberg, and see the faceted soul that she was: a callous sellsword, a capable commander... and a caring sister with true cherishment for her brother. For what else accounts her last words? Her last thoughts for Theodor?

'...I... I'm...'

...”sorry”.

For leaving too soon.

For living no longer by your side.

Till the bitter end did this sister worry for her brother. Then so should his newfound strength well-lay her worries to rest. Theodor, now strong upon his own two feet, stronger than even his loving sister—indeed, what better keepsake for her parting spirit?

“...”

Unbroken was that quieted brother’s stare upon me, with eyes distant, with ears yet ringing with my words. In his mien was enmity, of course. But something else, as well. Something, misting in and out of sight.

“...‘Look ill beyond the ungraced label’...” he seemed to recite. “...Always the fool that falls for his own folly...” Such introspection earned my puzzlement. But that moment soon ended as keenness glinted again in Theodor’s regard and a thunder returned to the air: that of his voice. “Enough! It’s high time I bled you dry, Rolf Buckmann!”

Thus resumed his lightning-flash offence, flickering in and out of reach, striking as he pleased, leaping away from any retaliation of my trying, only to lunge back in for another bite. Against such fury, I could but defend desperately and more desperately still.

“*Gghh...!*” I groaned with grinding teeth, drowning again in this sea of chanceless exchanges, of dodging Death time and again by mere slices of a second. Would that Theodor’s spear were slower by even a mite, then most certainly could I have answered it in full. But that selfsame mite of a difference gave the Östberg brother all the advantage he needed: over and on were dealt grazes and gashes upon my person, with none given in kind to the offender. Diverting ody from his spear to his sinews, then, had proven to my opponent the champion’s choice.

—*Bshhrr!*

Across my thigh opened a slit most straight, drawn by Theodor’s low-lunging thrust. From it flew fresh blood.

How deeply I desired to endure it all, that I might glean some gap in his rhythm and mount a timely counter. But at this rate, defeat by futility seemed my singular fate. Had I some way to strike my foe from a distance, if only to check or distract him... yet my only means here was held in my very hands: a sword.

A furrow twitched upon my brow. This was the exact same situation when I’d faced Felicia: unceasingly assailed from a distance, with no sword-swing of mine ever reaching its mark.

...Hold there.

Felicia?

Surely I’ve gained something from her, from fending off those fey spells of hers. Indeed this must be so. As Theodor himself had moulded his mettle to vie with mine, so should I assay the same. To vie with him... must I vie with myself. *My yesterself.*

To moult into a mightier man must Rolf of today triumph over himself of yesterday.

But needed for that feat were the boons of today's battles.

Then, I remembered it. A spark in the dark. Felicia's final offence: the Igniēns Īcendō. The dart of death, the surestriking shot—sundered by a swing of this soot-steel. If even *that* could be cut, then Theodor himself ought fall to the same sword.

I had but to recall the moment.

When Felicia's blood-black levin collected.

When that blistering line then lunged forth.

Against it, I...

...At once, I eased my every sinew. A taut string sooner snaps; in looseness, too, lives power. A tenet of the sword; a lesson I'd long left half-learnt. But aface Felicia had I felt closer to its secrets than ever before.

Untangle all tenseness. Empty all exertion. Cast from the conscience the boundary between flesh and atmosphere. Meld the mind with the ambiance about. Envision flesh as water, free and flowing.

Be as Nought. Sense the instant to strike. And as it comes, let Nought become Numberless. There shall prodigious strength and speed be born.

This all, I ventured. Voided of vigour and unfettered from faculties, I then sought Theodor's flickering form, waiting,

waiting, waiting for the moment of his arrival, for when the very shimmer in his eyes could be seen with all clarity.

And when that moment came, I flooded my body full with brunt, and brandished forth the lightless blade.

“Ssyah!!”

Sword and spear instantly intersected. Two blades blazing trails, a contest to sooner scythe the other’s master.

—Zzkkhrr!

The sound and sensation of rupturing flesh.

“Ghhh...!” came a rasping groan...

...from whose throat but mine.

Naught but air did the soot-steel savour, whilst given to Theodor’s spear was a feast of ungraced flesh, ripped fresh from my flank. Still, not yet was my life forfeit, a fact perhaps espied by the Östberg brother, as rather than wreak the mercy stroke, he once again retreated and stared me down from a distance.

“A close one, cur!” Theodor cried in concession. “Full-maimed might I’ve been right then and there, had some prior wound of yours not stayed that sword!”

An eagle-eyed estimation. Indeed was I yet harried by the hid wounds from Felicia’s Kōkūtós, enough that any deftness dared by my sword seemed a dullness. But such was too poor an excuse—it was my *guess* that had failed me, and made of my sword a fool’s swing. Theodor’s was a thinking mind, not some insentient magick, loosed upon a mark like some fevered foxhound—even if such magick were

mighty as Felicia's Igniēns Īcendō. Answering his spear as I did my sister's spells, then, was a blunder from the beginning.

"You really are too perilous a prey," my foe hissed. "Not till your beheading can this huntsman breathe in peace!"

Pouncing, Theodor began once again his gashing and gouging rampage. And true to his word, my death by a thousand cuts seemed his most desired design.

"*Kh... ghuh!*" On and on I struggled, blood and sparks spitting every which way with each exchange. Little by little, Theodor's lancing lunges whittled away at my flesh. Most miserable amongst them was the wound through my side as it gushed with greater crimson. At such a rate, my collapse loomed nigh.

Yet there was hope, one hid from Theodor with all stealth—step by step had I been sidling up to a certain spot, all the while warding off the speeding spears with as best a play at desperation as I could feign.

"Soon! Soon!" Theodor almost seemed to sing. "You'll see it soon enough! Your *ender's end*, Sis!"

It was right anear that very same sister of his where I next arrived. This was it. My second scheme. As fancied before: a means to strike my foe from afar.

"*Hha—ah!*" roared Theodor, returning fleetly for another joust.

Foreseeing his approach, I kicked up Viola's weapon from the ground and, catching it in one hand, reared myself back to readiness—for a last resort of a spear-throw.

How utterly leaden it felt in my fingers. Certainly not a thing to be thrown, this. But neither was the sword of soot a thing to be swung. Yet if even *that* could I master, then—

“Sseh!!”

Full-fast flew the Zaharte spear. Only, where it went was not the body of its late wielder’s brother, but only his feet.

In other words: exactly as aimed.

“Nngh!?” Startled, Theodor jerked and jumped to escape my schemed attack. But such was his momentum that the mere jump became a long and shallow leap—and a prison besides. Airborne, no longer could he correct either course or career.

Taking the opportunity, I bolted forth and heaved the blackblade in an overhead slash.

“Zzyaa—ah!!”

Fine soot misted, trailing the sailing steel. Thereafter shrieked shorn armour and flesh—

—the sound of Theodor sundered in his flight.

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Onward he arced through the air, his limbs limp as he went. Neither grace nor glory found him at his landing; slamming into the ground, Theodor’s body thudded air and earth both like a dying thunderbolt.

Further on he tumbled, a violent brushstroke drawing across the dirt a long streak of red, till at last, he stopped. Wisps of dust dangled in his wake. A lull fell. Yet the feeling lingered.

In my fingers. In my arms.

The sensation of having severed flesh. Of cutting bone.

Of landing the lethal blow.

Certain, I then set my eyes upon him.

There Theodor laid, like a thing crushed thin. Moments passed. Distant battle rumbled. Blood seeped in silence. By the end, his hands finally flinched. His body followed, quietly, quiveringly dragging itself back to its feet. With frightful effort, he turned my way, revealing a wound I dare not describe.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

At me he stared. Through a face steeped in sanguine soil, he stared. Without a word. Without a stir. I returned the look, equally quiet, never leaving his eyes.

A muffled thump next murmured. Dust sprang again. His spear had fallen. The proud polearm, caked crimson with ungraced blood, now freed from its master's fingers. Then did that same master begin to move. A slow and shivering shamle, step after unsteady step, each made with the last of his strength. I but watched on, silent still.

He seemed in approach towards me, eyes intent upon mine as they were. But I knew better.

For betwixt us laid Viola.

Nearer and nearer still he came, hauling his feet across the blood-damp dirt. Only, at a few strides from his sister, his legs failed, and to the ground he foundered.

But before long, up from the dust rose his face.

And straining, striving, his arms further assayed.

To crawl closer to his cold sister.

I dared not lend him aid. This was his moment. *Their* moment. *Their* world. Theirs, and theirs alone, never to suffer any other soul—not least one who had wrought upon them this very fate.

In time, Theodor gained Viola, and there clambered up to her side. Then, taking her hand, his fingers caressed and curled about hers. His other hand reached around her nape, and bringing her close...

...the brother embraced his dead sister.

Theodor's eyes then faded to a close. I felt next the last of his life lifting into the air, and in that still and sighing expanse, dissipating from all perception.

To depart to paths unknown.

And join again his beloved sister.

“ ... ”

Alone, I left my eyes to linger upon the two, entwined as they were, and pondered them. Their lives, their lot—none of which I knew, and could scarce guess. Only one thing was certain, and in fixing upon it, a rosey-red thought then glimmered in my mind.

A maiden of deep-ruby eyes.

My one and only sister.

...With whom on this day I did not embrace, but battled to a bitter end.

“...”

The Östberg siblings. Foes felled, but never to be forgotten. Not as they were afore me, fast in each other's touch.

Long must they have braved this too-wicked world—together. A mountainous struggle, mildened only by the strength and solace of their sibling bond. A warmth shared till the ultimate cold.

Aface their enfolded forms as I was, I suffered then a spear of another sort, one stabbing clear through my bosom and moving my lips to a whisper.

“Begotten by the same belly... sharing the same days... only to...”

I closed my eyes.

Behind the half-lit lids, I saw her again.

The face of my fair Felicia.

There did she look back, yet not with any gladness.

But a gaze of many tears.

“...Theodor. Viola. This victory... it is yours,” I uttered,
“...more than you shall ever know.”

Triumph. Tragedy.

Wagers won. Lives lost.

Sweetly was never savoured the wine celebrating the
bitter victory.

Such was the scar left upon my conscience.

::

For what seemed too long did we make battle.

Felling Men, being felled in turn—on and on, the fires
burnt and our hale seemed soon to flag. Yet still we strove
and kept lit the torch of purpose, for there was anticipation
amongst our number: a victory, near at hand.

Yes, victory—our aim here at Arbel. The day promised it
to us, and with all care had we made plans, that it might be
pleased and make good on it. But the long struggle
mayhaps has muddied my eyes, as when this scene afore
me unfolded, it seemed more a dream than aught.

A scene of Men halting and quelling.

A scene of their sudden surrender.

“Fräulein...” called a brave of mine, “...could it be...?”

Wide-eyed, I let drop my wearied hands. “It... it could,” I stammered out an answer.

So ‘twas no dream at all, or otherwise one shared by my comrades all: looking about, I found them each dazed with disbelief for this new silence.

After Ulrik, that ogre of a Man, had perished, we fought on to great advantage. Yet even then the Fiefguard’s mettle held strong: dogged and more dogged still the Men resisted, as though death were a sweeter end than defeat.

We had thought then that foul winds were soon to blow upon this pitched battle, that a wasting and wasteful strife would be ours to wage. But the thought was sooner allayed. What we had next gleaned was a queerness amongst our enemies: orders running through their ranks, meeting stunned ears.

Click-click. Clank-clank.

Now resounded many Mennish swords and spears, all of them clamouring to the earth. Some of their wielders fell with them—to the knees, anguished and lost. Peering up were some others, searching the clouds for some never-coming answer.

To my comrades, ‘twas clear then: the Fiefguard were defeated, having cast their arms and chosen surrender.

“Word was sent to them,” another brave wondered aloud. “But what...?”

“Word of their masters’ fall, mayhaps?” I guessed, as in my mind was lit an image of another Man. “He’s done it...” I said, “...Rolf has slain the Östbergs...!”

No other course could there be. Dead was their lord; this we knew. Yielding here, then, meant but one thing: the commanders of Zaharte were no more. And with them, the Fiefguard’s will for war and the fastness of Arbel both.

Long have we Vílungen vied with the House of Ström for this land of our breeding. A great many battles, waged by my father, his predecessor, and more uncounted jarlar there on. Such has it ever been. Such shall it ever be. This we had always thought.

But even over so enduring a stage could fall the proverbial curtains. And drawing them were not the hands of one of ours... but a *Man’s*. So asudden had he appeared in our midst. So keen had he guided our blades through this battle. So decisive did he end in days what generations could not.

That’s not to say the war was won. Vast and dark yet loomed the shadow of Londosius; ‘twas only a patch of it that we had managed to illumine as our own. And for what end but some peace of mind for our long-suffering brethren—one that might endure for a fleeting moment, as from far yonder was doubtless the march of Londosius’ answer.

We had to muster our own, and swift. Every effort, every thought bent to this single enterprise, if with any dearness did we long for a lasting victory and silence to this war.

...A “silence to this war”.

Till not a week ago had I believed such a thing possible. But now in my bosom was hope, small but brave against the

shadow. A candle enkindled...

'...Londosius shall fall...'

...by these very words, uttered resolute from whose mouth but that beacon of a Man.

"Hh... khh...!"

Beside me so wept a fellow brave.

...Nay. 'Twas not just he.

We were all of us moved to tears. Sniffing, snivelling above smiles and frowns both. Recalling our dear lost. Glad for our friends and family yet alive. For alive would they remain.

Yes...

Alive.

Why, we ought rejoice.

From tomorrow and on would the battles endure, true, but for today...

...today, we can rejoice.

For we have won.



"...uu... hic... auu..."

Crying.

Up on a great, big beech tree, I cry and cry. Further and further up is my handkerchief, a white and pretty little thing. My very favourite, but now 'tis stuck on a twig behind many, many leaves.

A blow of the wind has whisked it there, and I thought to go after it. And so after it I've went, up and up the sky-high tree. But a look down along the way has left me dizzied and scared too asudden and too much to move a mite further. And so have I stayed sat upon a big, beechen bough, clinging to the trunk and crying on and on.

"...aau... hic... hhau..."

I'm frozen where I am. I can't climb, nor come back down. I can't even stand to look anywhere below. But the sun is setting; night is nearing. What am I to do...?

I'm scared.

Oh so scared.

And so very alone.

So very, very...

...I...

...I hear someone.

Just as my tears are beginning to tire, my ears take in a voice from far below.

The same voice I've been wishing and wanting to hear.

"Don't cry, Felicia," the boy below says. "I'm here for you now."

Up and up the trunk he flies, the bearer of that voice, swift and sure as a squirrel. Soon enough, he's beside me, patting my pate and casting a quiet smile.

"Be good and wait here," he says, calm and secure. "I'll be right back with your handkerchief."

Then, reaching aloft, he lifts himself up to a higher bough and climbs through the canopy. Keeping watch, I spot him easily plucking the handkerchief free, and before long, he's back by my side. With the cloth returned, he then softly caresses my crown.

How big and warm, his hand. A touch of sunlight, just as always.

A mere year apart we are. But he's to me a guardian angel—just as always.

And so about my angel I throw my arms and embrace him as tightly as I can. All the fear, all the loneliness then seem to fly away. Far, far away.

"Brother...! Oh, Brother...!" I cry into his breast.

"Now, now," he says softly. "No more worrying. You did well. All's fine now."

"I'm... I'm sorry, Brother," I snivel. "The wind blew, and... and...!"

But with the fear gone, I find myself flushing from shyness and shame. The little lady of a lord's house, climbing a tree? A silly story. Yet 'twasn't so silly to have got trapped on high, to have troubled my dear brother with yet another chore.

I weave one excuse after another, making little sense or none at all. But, smiling, Brother heeds them all till the end, before bidding me thus:

"Felicia," he says. "Look there."

Yonder where his eyes stare, framed and festooned by the trees of our wood, is a portrait of ridges, high and far in the horizon. There the sun is sat, half-aslumber above the hills. The rays shimmering through the limbs and leaves, the skies blushing between glow and gloam—a world as rich and warm as the oranges we enjoyed last summer. Taking in the picture book vista, I can't help but be left in wordless wonder.

"Today's treat—and the treasure at the end of our little adventure," so says my brother, caressing my head again. "Thank you, Felicia. It's a fine place you've found. But next time, don't go it alone, you hear?"

"Yes... dear Brother," I answer, squinting ticklishly and relishing in his touch.

My Brother, ever and always there to protect me.

Ever and always there to save me.

My beloved Brother.

My...

...

..

.

..

...

...My eyes lifted open.

'Twas quiet.

Water whispered. Creatures chirped. The sunken sun sighed.

I was lying amidst grass and gravel. A near ran a river. Above spanned a bridge. About slumbered the city.

'Twould seem I had been sleeping fast... or had fallen afaint. I knew not for certain, only, 'twas likely that—spent of all odyl, forworn by many woes... and broken from battle—I had failed and for hours was passed from all thought.

Battle...

Yes. I had fled from battle. Fled from the concentration camp. Fled to these outskirts under cover of commotion—namely, the wretched retreat of the Zaharte remnants, their lives each owed to the mercy of the Nafílim victors.

The battle was lost, then. A battle wherein my hard-learned and years-honed spells were severed and silenced. A battle wherein I was foiled at every effort, brought to the very last brink, and made to bleed... by Brother's own blade.

I sat still under the stonework, hid from all sight,
reminiscing on the misery that came before...

“ ...”

...and there, remembered the dream.

A nostalgic dream. A dream of when Brother was yet
strong and sheltered under his wings his little sister.

Today, too, was he strong. Though I scarce thought him
so at the start. Why, I'd even belittled him, slighted him
sore, and boasted brazenly of how my mettle stood a
mountain over his. But amidst the battle did the mists part,
and there was revealed his higher summits.

How handily he had defeated me.

And how strongly.

That such strength was in him, I never knew.

That ever and always had it remained in him, fast and
unfaded... never had I known.

But now was his path parted from ours, from Emilie's
and mine, that never again would he suffer us by his side.

Nay...

'Twas winters ago that our parts had parted. But now did
they intertwine once more...

*'...Nay, Felicia...
We must forge ahead...
We must fight...*

*We're foes, now...
You and I...!*

"...hh..."

Crying.

Yet again was I crying. Down my cheeks trickled bitter warmth. From my voice trickled broken sobs.

"...aah... hic... auu..."

Why?

Why will you not stay by our side?

Was pushing you away once...

...any reason to push us away forever?

Is that the way of it?

Then...

...then what of it...!?

What matter!?

We're family, after all!

You and I!

My brother...!

My dear, dear Brother!

“...au... hic... aau...”

On and on, I cried and cried. But no matter how many tears I shed, never did Brother come to wipe them away.

∴

Through the concentration camp I walked.

Evenlight was fallen. From noon till gloam had we fought, and only now was the battle full-silenced. Gone were the screams and roars, the clamour of weapons and armour. Filling the vesper instead was another commotion: from here, there, everywhere, much cheer and merriment was made, that we might've seemed fete-goers were this any other day.

A gentle chill fluttered through the air, but little it did to cool the glow of victory. Tidings, too, of the captives' rescue were soon broken to us all. Twenty and more, safe and sound—what a gladness to our ears, that happy and happier still danced our long-forgotten joy.

“Hurra, Fräulein! Hurra!” rejoiced a brave, his face ashine with tears. “It is done! The day is ours!”

“‘Tis indeed,” I answered him. “Thank you. And thank you all!”

On and on, many more alike to him offered me their mirth and humour as they revelled and frolicked in each other's arms.

A victory. A fruitful, sore-deserved victory. One that the chroniclers would be no less teary-eyed in documenting, as they sit and struggle to put to words what we participants could not: the sheer elation we felt for this momentous achievement.

That said, gaiety would come later for myself and Volker. Much drudgery lies in wait after a battle; today was no different, and the shoulders to bear that burden were whose but ours. To this moment was Volker making terms with the defeated; to wit, a middle commander representing the remnant Fiefguard. And whilst that brew was simmering away, 'twas my duty to make the rounds, verifying our casualties and dictating the mending of our wounded.

"Mm... Where's that Man gone off to?" I wondered aloud.

Searching out Rolf, too, was another duty of mine. 'Twas after laying the Östbergs low that he'd made his return to us. But in such a state of injury had we found him: riddling his body were slits and gashes without number, from all of which coursed a grim sum of blood. Most gruesome of them was his flank, gouged asunder by some evil spear.

Straightway I had him seen to by our læćas and barbers. Much mending was needed, and much more rest besides. 'Twas only once the battle had settled that I'd thought to pay him a visit. But arriving at the beds, I was stunned to find him absent.

His treatment had been done with, for true, yet convalescence required respite. This his wisdom ought

know. Whatever could he be up to, then?

'Twas my mission to find out.

And as well...

...to indulge in a bit of bragging.

'Twere *my* blades that felled Ulrik, after all, the very same worm that had so wriggled out of Rolf's grasp. What would *he* think of it, I wonder? If he would have the ears for it, I should like to regale him of the feat in great detail, and mayhaps tease out of him a word of praise or three.

"Hmm... here? Or...?" To the very rear of the bastille have I gone. Turning the bend, I spotted at last his towering figure. "Ah! There you... are..."



Silence took my words.

This... was no occasion for high voices.

Alone he stood, Rolf. All alone against the blazing twilight, making not a stir. Most grave were his eyes as they but stared and stared at the ground afore him. 'Twas slight-raised and round, that patch of earth, as if piled by spades. But from the look of Rolf's mien, I guessed it at once.

'Twas a barrow.

Once a pit, but now a mound, with not a headstone to mark it. And sleeping in droves beneath were those vain-lost to the evils of this place. Of this, I had no doubt.

To this barrow did Rolf give his full mind. On and on, he looked at it. On and on, he stood as still as stone.

Hitherto have I never asked him of such, but seeing him so morose, the thought grew in me louder than ever.

That Rolf walked with no god.

That prayers were naught to him.

Whether in their meaning, or their doing.

And so not even could he have closed his eyes in vigil. Not even could he recite some dirge, or lay candles for a wake. All he could do was look upon the earth. On and on

and on. And mayhaps speak with his heart to the silent dead. To soothe them. To remember them.

Just as Rolf looked long upon the barrow, so did I give him long my eyes. In all that time, his brows furrowed not a bit. Dusk was deepened by now, and still he remained on his feet, unmoving. The stars began to blink, painting him blue in their light. Yet still he stared down at the barren earth.

Seeing the side of his soot-stained face, I found him both tranquil and troubled as skies over a tired battlefield. Unable to turn my eyes away from him, I felt more and more his infinite regard for the dear departed.

— VII —

'...No... That... that cannot be...'

'...Emilie... I'm very sorry...'

Felicia was returned from Ström.

But glad were neither her spirits nor the tidings she'd brought home with her. Indeed, when we were sat at last to discuss in earnest what'd befallen that margravate, I could not believe my very ears.

Still, never was Felicia one for flagrant lies, nor one to misreckon a terrible thing so unfolded afore her eyes. This I knew. I knew, and yet... I could not bear it. I could not *believe*. And neither did I want to.

'... 'Sorry'...? But... how...? Rolf... how could he...'

...How could he march with the Nafílim?

And fly their pennons? And counsel their warpath?

...And wage battle against his own sister?

My stomach turned when I'd heard Felicia's report, and more still when she next recounted the grazing blow she'd received from Rolf's blade. 'Twas no lie, then. No lie, and yet...

Yet it could not be so. It *should not* be so.

Why, this was *Rolf* we were speaking of. Felicia's dear brother. And... and to myself...

...the one to walk alongside me. The one with whom I wish to spend my every winter, till dotage and death should take us.

Too much yet remained. To answer for. To apologise for. The misunderstandings, the misjudgement, the misheld hearing, the misgiven banishment—these and all. And only from there would the true trial begin. Of making amends, of rebuilding what was broken, of rekindling the candle we once shared.

How I longed for this. How I longed for the chance, one that if given, I should grovel upon the ground afore him, reveal to him my every remorse, and say all the sorries as my lungs would allow, that he might find it in his heart to forgive his dear and foolish Emilie...

...and yet...

'...Emilie... Brother, he's... he's...'

...so far away.

So, so very far away...

“ ... ”

I opened my eyes, finding myself swaying upon my carriage seat, as on and on I recalled aught and all that Felicia had revealed to me not more than a week before. Yet no matter how many times it all played through my head, none of the details dared change in the slightest. No matter how shut an eye I turned to it, never would the nightmare fade.

Felicia was sat beside me, wordless the entire journey. As I looked upon her dour regard, the carriage halted. Shimmering beyond the window now were ornate gates and many sentinels at attention. At last were we arrived at the royal palace, centre of Redelberne, and home of the Londosian Crown.

†

Ushered through the regal estate, my retinue and I at length entered into its great hall. There, solemn grandeur looked to sigh from the very pillars, the walls, the many inlaid mouldings and more. Lancet windows overlooked from the vaults far, far above, spilling cascades of midlight upon those assembled below.

None were suffered here excepting the highest authorities of Londosius. As evidence, situated in this great hall was the high table, shaped from a long slab of walnut

and finished and polished so that it sooner seemed marbled than wooden; and sat along its ponderous length were the realm's high commanders—the mareschals of Londosius' knightly Orders.

The Lady Estelle Tiselius of the 1st.

Sir Stefan Cromheim of the 2nd.

Sir Matthias Juholt of the 3rd.

And myself: Emilie Valenius of the 5th.

Seated beside them were each their own retinues of leading officers. Mine was very much the same, with Felicia right at hand. Though as it happened, none of my Owlcranes could accompany me on this day, for their prior commitments were beyond deferral.

“That Brandt,” echoed deep the voice of the Mareschal Juholt. “His seat—stone-cold as ever, I see.”

“I beg you forgive my master, good Mareschal,” said a knight—namely the 4th's under-mareschal, whose face was flush with embarrassment.

Sir Bo Brandt, Knight Mareschal to the 4th Order. Ever was he the sort to take absence from meetings as this, and today seemed no different—though it be a summons from the Crown of Londosius itself.

And as if on cue, the double doors to this great hall tolled open.

“All rise for Her Royal Highness!” cried the herald, first to enter. At once, we the assembled stood erect from our

seats and duly hailed the incoming procession of attendants, officials, guardsmen, standard-bearers...

...and Her Royal Highness herself: the First Princess Serafina Demeter Londosius.

Long was her satin-silver hair and austere were her pearl-grey eyes. With a complexion of delicate nacre, the whole of her appearance was alike to the magnum opus of a master dollmaker, a porcelain figure to define the craft itself.

Glowing from her mien was sagacity, a match for her native excellence and capacity. So much so, in fact, that even at her springtide age of eighteen, the princess had been entrusted by her king father with much of his erstwhile prerogative, and so governed in his stead no few affairs of the realm.

The great stir of footfalls presently calmed. With grace, the princess took her seat at the head of the high table, but soon did much of her royal entourage begin marching their way back out of the great hall, leaving but Her Highness and a scant few others to remain. 'Twas expected; doubtless matters of strict confidentiality would be discussed hereon.

Once the doors shut with a long echo, the princess looked all along us defenders of her realm. "Pray, sit to your comfort," she bade, to which we all obliged, as did the man beside her: the lord chancellor of the king's cabinet. "Your answering our summons during so pressing a time, we thank you for," said the princess, before turning her eyes to one knight in particular. "And thee more so, Sir Stefan, and withal those that have suffered like pains for this precarious occasion—from far yonder, indeed, have ye travelled."

“This vassal’s sword is as your own, Your Royal Highness,” Cromheim returned, bowing from his seat. “Through sand or sleet, ever shall its blade brave aught and all to answer your call.”

The knight Sir Stefan Cromheim, mareschal to the 2nd—scarce more than thirty years was his age, though his youthfulness belied those years well, for subtract ten of them, and none would be the wiser. Especially not women; stories abound of their droves charmed straightway by his groomed locks of sunny bistre, mannerisms soft and sophisticated, and other like facets fair to behold. Such, too, belied his worth as a man of the military, for he was accounted far and wide as a rightwise knight, able-armed and just of hand and mind.

Yet his honeyed declaration earned but a faint chuckle from the princess. “...Then by those words,” she said to him, “thou wouldst measure the absent mareschal a truant sword than chivalric steel?”

Answering in Cromheim’s stead was the 4th’s under-mareschal, who fretted in his seat. “Your Royal Highness, if I may—”

“Have ease, good knight,” the princess stayed him. “Know we well thy master’s worth and ways, of how he availeth our realm even to this moment. And that is enough,” she said. “Now shall we hold council. Chancellor?”

“Yes, Highness,” so obliged from beside the princess the Lord Chancellor Hugo Rudels, a stern man nearing six decades in his years. Sweeping a look across the table, he then addressed us all. “As you all have been made aware, we convene today as touching the margravate of Ström. Or

more precisely..." he paused, knitting his lips, "...the former lands thereof."

Graveness darkened further in us all.

That's right: Ström was lost. No longer was it a margravate. No longer was it even of this realm. No; 'twas wrested by hands of the Nafílim host. Such we'd known through classified missives sent from Central leading up to this day, but the weight of the chancellor's words bore no less crushingly upon our shoulders.

And painfully upon my heart.

This very morrow at the royal inn had found me seized by fits of retching and disgorging. Such was my dread for this moment, my brimming anxiety for this council. I'd disappear at once, were I allowed, for I wished not one bit to share a word in this matter, nor give ear to any. This was a topic most anathema, and looking beside me, I was certain the same was so for Felicia, who had hitherto been darkly sat, hushed and downcast.

"From months prior has the fortunes of Balasthea Stronghold been taking turns most fair. And the Nafílim tide that had so broken upon its walls? Quite the opposite," the chancellor recounted. "To such extent that the Margrave Aaron, Lord of Ström, saw fit to foray into nearby Hensen and herald doom unto that Nafílim nest."

Balasthea—once a fort ever teetering over the edge of destruction. That its situation was turned 'round completely was a fact known to every mind in this great hall. And as well, the fact that such was achieved only after a certain man took up the post as its new acting commandant.

“The margrave’s foraying Fiefguard... two thousands strong, they were. But now, two thousands *slain*,” the Lord Hugo emphasised. “Yes, my good Mareschals. An ill and utter *defeat* for the score of Man. Half a hand could well-count the survivors, but not a finger may lift even for Balasthea’s best, for verily had all thirty of them, too, joined the foray. Not one whereof has returned.”

Many brows furrowed. No recent memory could recall so arrant a defeat. And certainly no mind could’ve expected the lord of Ström to suffer it, known as he was for his effectivity and long years of keeping the Nafílim at bay.

A host of a hundred score—surely had he scried some glint of victory, to have sent such a number. Yet as all now knew, ‘twas a light as false as ‘twas fatal.

“And alas, the Hensenite hounds ill-sat silent. They marched in vengeance, bending their baleful thought upon Balasthea. And Balasthea they *took*,” the chancellor went on. “Arbel’s remnant men mustered an immediate answer, to be sure, but in their march from the city gates, they were waylaid, and laid low.”

Uneasy murmurs frothed through the air.

We’d all known the “what” of Ström’s fall, but not so much the “how”. Would that the Fiefguard had barricaded the city instead and stood their ground. Thus surely would a gladder fate have awaited their land. Why, then, had they eschewed the safety of their city? Why risk open battle? Such questions filled our every head. The one to air them at last, however, was the mareschal of the 2nd.

“They had but to sit still and steel their walls,” he said. “What worm was it, I wonder, that had so tempted them from their perch?”

“The worm of *cunning*, Mareschal Cromheim,” the chancellor answered. “Reports tell of Nafílim snakes spreading lies the night prior, of what but the Fiefguard’s ‘*victory*’ at Hensen. Yet occupied as it was, Balasthea would have served but a snare against the unknowing ‘victors’ in their return. *That* was the worm the margrave pecked.”

“Devious, those devil-vermin,” remarked Juholt. “They played the lord’s pride like a puppet, for no better plan had he if delivering his precious men were foremost on his mind. Such is certain!”

The 3rd’s mareschal huffed grimly. A man in his early forties, Juholt’s was a sharp face with deep-set eyes, framed by a grown stubble and a crown of short-sheared hair, both dusk-gold in colour.

For fifteen winters and more has this man served as mareschal. Whether it be of field command or strength of arms, of administering his Order or mastering his temperament, Juholt was as staunch as a bedrock, never to err, never to founder. Indeed, a veritable lynchpin of the realm’s military, he was ever constant and noble in the face of war.

At such a knight the chancellor nodded. “But a plan put to motion nonetheless, to the price of seven hundreds more slain,” the Lord Hugo further revealed. “Already had the margrave lost a hundred scores at Hensen. And so was his hand too hasty, his cards too few—a fate sealed the moment he bit the bait.”

“Were that hand mine, consulting the deck might’ve cut a brighter course,” mused Cromheim. “Mercenaries—some coin for their lot ought’ve bought much breath for the failing Fiefguard, no?”

“The margrave’s was mayhaps very much the same mind, Mareschal,” the chancellor guessed. “As it happened, he had, in fact, sought the service of sellswords, for tarrying then in Ström-land were none other than the Zaharte Battalion.”

Another sea of murmurs stirred amongst us all. Zaharte was a name vociferously known to us, not least to every corner of the kingdom itself. And yet...

“Faith! The lot led by the Östberg siblings!” Juholt cried, smiling. “Young spears, those two, but more keen and quick than their years let on!”

“Old acquaintances, I presume, Mareschal Juholt?” the chancellor asked flatly.

“Indeed. Though but once did we meet, and long ago,” Juholt nodded. “Come, Lord Chancellor. Regale me of their valour.”

“Valour?” The Lord Hugo cocked his brows bitterly. “My dear Mareschal. They are *vanquished*.”



The sharpness in Juholt’s mien dulled in that moment.

“...Pity,” he yielded in a low voice, before letting fall his gaze. He seemed for a while greyed asudden by age or trouble, as though reminded of an old sorrow. A life more than half-spent in war ought’ve numbed his heart to the uncounted, untimely demises of his juniors. But looking at

him, I knew then that no number of years, no hardness of will, could ever prepare one for so solemn a tiding.

The chancellor sighed. “Yet ere their fall, the margrave had entrusted to the Östbergs total command of his Fiefguard,” his briefing continued. “As for why, most certainly had he a mind to steal away to the safety of neighbouring Tallien... were it not for his foul luck. Our agents discovered him a corpse—cloven, cold, and concealed in the wine cellar beneath his manor.”

“The death of a lord vassal. The seizing of Londosian land. ‘Ill and utter defeat’, indeed,” concluded Her Highness. And though she stressed much the gravity of the loss, not once did her mien seem even warmed by either wrath or shame. “It was our original mind to send for you all today, that we might take counsel touching twofold the fall of Balasthea and the answer necessary thereof. But too fickle be the whims of the fates, for Londosius was *yet whole* when our couriers first took to the road with your summonses,” she explained most deliberately, an effort to impress upon us the exigency of this situation. “*Seven*, mine honoured knights. *Seven* be the sum of days betwixt the march on Hensen and the fall of Arbel. For such foesome speed must we account, lest we suffer too-soon again another crisis never seen in centuries past.”

This was but the prelude, simply put. Not soon would this mad tide recede. Or perhaps, its waters were already at our feet. Perhaps we were none the wiser, oblivious to the flood now rising to engulf us all.

A flood by the name of “strife”.

An era to scar our history.

“Of one seed do we know that has quickened into this foul growth: *treachery*,” the chancellor spoke emphatically. “A Londosian soldier; Balasthea’s acting commandant himself; a Man who has full-fraternised with the Nafílim.”

Astonishment swept through the forgathered. In truth, we’d all been apprised of a likely traitor behind this chaos, yet of the Orderly knights here, ‘twas only Felicia and I who were privy to the chancellor’s last detail. Indeed, never could any of the others have imagined so complete a betrayal. To turn against Man, to walk with the Nafílim—the mere thought twisted their faces in disbelief.

An inkling was in me, wishing that I were amongst that collective astonishment, for uncertainty seemed then a comforting veil from so haunting a reality.

“Eldest son he is, and cadet to a baron-house,” the chancellor continued, almost spitting. “And now, a wolver withersake withal—one by the name of *Rolf Buckmann*.”

The assembled’s unease was riled at once. Though my three fellow mareschals sustained their composure as they stayed sat in deep thought, the same could hardly be said for the great many of our subordinates, whose indignance whipped the air itself into a bluster.

“Rolf the wretch! I know his stench! The filth of the 5th! The ungraced himself!”

“Ah! The pieces fit, then!”

“He would spurn all of Man, is it!? All because our Deiva has spurned *him!*? How rotted be this rebel!?”

‘That miserable malefactor’, ‘let justice stab him full-through’; biting words, writhing into our ears, one after

another. Amidst the tumult, Cromheim began his own words—quietly, as though the crowd were never there at all.

“What of proof?” he propounded. “Have we any? Some token that tells true the treachery of this Rolf Buckmann?”

At once, the incensed leadership were becalmed. A pause, and the chancellor gave an answer.

“We have, indeed. ‘Living proof’, as it were, here in the flesh: his blood-sister, against whom he has brandished arms,” he said, before turning his eyes my way. “Mareschal Valenius. Her account, if you will.”

My stomach turned. “...Yes, Excellency.”

I looked to Felicia. Tenseness invested her as she quivered with dread. Never would I have dared drag her here in such a state, but ‘twas not a thing to be helped. Only she could full-attest to her brother’s crime, and as a dame of Londosius, she was beholden to oblige.

How small she seemed. Seeing her shrunken so, I could but recall fairer days faraway, when Felicia was yet little and toddled happily after her brother’s every step.

†

“...And there was I forced unto retreat.”

So ended Felicia’s account, greyly told bit by bit. In that entire span did her gaze remain half-fallen, whilst her hands were pressed into her lap, whitely clenched. Myriad

expressions coloured the faces of the knightly leadership as they gave her their collective ear. Some seemed green with suspicion, others red with displeasure.

After a brief hush, one amongst them spoke. “‘Sundered spells’, you said. How certain is this?”

“...Very,” Felicia answered.

“We have taken testimony enough from witnesses of the traitor’s mettle,” the chancellor added. “The Brigadier speaks true.”

And so was it known. A thunderbolt of a fact, attested by many eyes: Rolf, seen cleaving through *palings*, cutting through *magicks*.

“I doubt not your account, Brigadier Buckmann, yet...” Cromheim asked carefully, “...your eyes deceived you not, I trust? When they saw the Igniēns Īcendō, of all spells, severed and snuffed?”

“...Yes,” Felicia answered again. “They saw true.”

Eyewitness testimony, a first-person account; slowly did the truth sink in as any remnant doubt faded. The mareschals, the leadership, all fell silent for a long while, frozen in rumination. But when a voice broke the quiet at last, it spoke of another matter entirely.

“Well, certainly shall we set all thought upon this man and his new ‘friends’. But one thing demands sooner clarity,” broached one of our subordinates. “House Buckmann. What shall be *their* fate?”

A cascade of nods swept through the Order leadership. Indeed, as justice ought be meted upon a withersake, so

ought the fate of his associates, kin or no, be deliberated upon—mine included.

“Irrelevant,” snapped Juholt. “We meet upon matters of the *military*, let us not forget.”

The mareschal had the right of it. Domestic affairs deserved another day, not when the realm’s highest echelons were so gathered. But the leadership were not so easily convinced.

“Yet we have here with us the very sister to that sicarius,” the dissenter resisted. “So let us clear the air, I say, first and foremost; discuss the course of House Buckmann and all others familiar to the traitor. Evil runs deep; we must uproot it whilst we can.”

Assent crescendoed from all ‘round. Felicia remained sat utterly still, lips pursed shut. Before long, the commotion settled as all eyes turned to Her Highness, begging her voice in this matter.

“Yet deeper runneth the wisdom of our forebears,” she began, unhurried. “My granduncle... our prior sovereign hath, in his time, pardoned the kindred of a patricidal conspirator. Such precedent the former King then did enshrine, and so were stricken from the land all laws charging kin on grounds of association.” With those words, the princess then turned her iron-sea eyes our way. “As then, so today: a pardon, therefore, ought be given to the House of Buckmann.”

“Your Highness,” the chancellor started, giving scarce time for our relief. “It is as you say. Indeed, no such law is listed in our legislation. No longer, anyhow. Yet if I may, we must needs mistake not the absence of law for an absolving hand. We reckon here flagrant rebellion against the realm;

pardon even the *thought* of perfidy, and I fear we shall stoke the distaste of the noble houses.”

The chancellor’s words were as a chill air hissing into our ears. His reputation as a shrewd and callous politician was baring itself full afore us all.

“That, we know well,” returned the princess. “Hence shall the lord and lady of House Buckmann be confined to their estate, the governance whereof to be assumed by appointed consuls *pro tempore*. Such shall be the full burden for the Buckmanns to bear, and aught heavier we shall not brook, for their house is to endure...” she declared, then turning to Felicia, “...and their daughter withal. Hers is a strength certain to succour our future assays; dispensing with her now shall be but to our dear detriment.”

“With all due respect, Your Highness, a bitter remedy bites the malady all the more mightily,” debated the chancellor. “We lose little to swallow it here, for a blight does fester beneath the unwitting watch, does it not? Let us search out the worms of sin, my Princess, and withal the soil that did give rise to such rot as *Rolf Buckmann*.”

How doggedly he stood his ground, this chancellor, even aface the decree of Her Highness—an effort perhaps attempted purely to fulfil the expectation of his office. Even still, none of what he’s said sat right with me.

“How now, Lord Chancellor,” drummed Juholt’s voice. “Too deep a dosage and even a remedy might prove a poison. Why, set to wind your very words, and swiftly would you find yourself flocked by our more... *fanatic* fowl, who should like naught more than to upheave the whole of the 5th, all to peck out those ‘worms’ of yours. For verily it was

the 5th's 'sin' to have sent the man to Ström firstly, was it not? Nay, disturb not *that* nest, I say."

"My fellow Mareschal makes a fair point," agreed Cromheim, before glancing my way. "The Lady Emilie is a lioness invaluable to Londosius, and a lodestar besides to its folk, high and lowborn both. The realm would plunge into uproar were this scandal sown against her regard."

"...It would, indeed," the chancellor relented at last.

Naught more of this matter was heard from him on this council, and as his was the most prominent voice of dissent, so, too, were all other malcontents silenced. And with them, any mind that so saw criminality in past association with Rolf.

Thus were Felicia and I pardoned. As for her parents... their lot was not to be helped. Truth be told, I paid them small concern, for by this time, they were scarce more than a lukewarm relation to me. Certainly had they treated me gently during my years in the Buckmann barony, but never did I forgive nor forget their cold hand in disinheriting Rolf and annulling our betrothal.

"Your understanding solaces us all, Excellency," said Cromheim. "Now, shall we delve into the crux of this council?"

What ought be our answer to this new threat, how might the Nafílim be confronted and Rolf vanquished—such was the "crux" of which Cromheim spoke, and the one matter I dreaded most, far and above the potential charges against Felicia and myself.

"Very well," answered the chancellor. "But to the quick of it, we shall bestir the Orders to stem this tide. That much

is certain. Rolf Buckmann is a mark best caught alive... but we shall welcome his breathless body no less gladly.”

I inly gasped.

In such circumstance as we were, the chancellor’s words ought not be strange to any ear. Yet to mine, they were as a stab to the belly. Rolf’s “breathless body”—the mere sound of those words chilled all the blood in my own.

“Yes, *caught!* And given to the gallows!”

“Slip the smallfolk upon him, why not! Let him savour a good stoning! That he might sore-rue every sin of his committal!”

“The hubris of this heretic! Whip him till he whimpers like the whelp that he is!”

Now were the leaders more raucous than before. My subordinates, too, were joined in the commotion, as though Rolf were to them no less a stranger. On and on they lashed themselves to greater frenzy, spewing words I wished never to hear.

Yet how familiar it seemed.

The hearing from months ago.

In remembering it, I saw again Rolf standing alone in a storm of spite.

...A storm he’s endured for five long years.

“Yet who would sooner whimper? The rebel? Or you rabble?”

Ringling clear through the air now was a voice, bell-like and pristine. A voice hitherto unlet during this entire council. All attention followed it to its source, sighting first undulating locks of lavender—and eyes keener than any blade.

There was she sat, unmoved by the sudden scrutiny: Estelle Tiselius, Dame Mareschal to the 1st.



“...‘Rabble’ might ruffle one feather too many, mademoiselle,” remarked a leader sat anear Tiselius. Though his words expressed displeasure for his mistress, the tone behind them seemed tepid with resignation. All the other leaders shared in his futility, unable to rebuke the mareschal even as many of their faces were twisted with annoyance.

For how could they? Tiselius was the finest blade in all the realm, never to abide an out-of-hand scolding. Not least from myself, for although the both of us were hero-dames, from her portance alone did I measure her far more worthy of the title.

But met with the sewn lips of the Orderly knights, the chancellor frowned as he then aired their unease.

“How now, fair Mareschal,” he said, his voice a stony echo. “An explanation is well in order, I should think.”

“Explanation, Excellency?” asked Tiselius, cocking her head. “‘Strong be our foe’. Might that suffice?”

“Strong enough to earn even *your* fear, I gather?” the chancellor began disputing. “Need I remind you that he is a man unmagicked? A waif unworthy of *Her* strength?”

“Need I remind *you*, Excellency, of the words spoken mere moments ago?” the hero-dame softly returned. “That ‘unmagicked’ man vied with the best magicks of our brigadier—and won.”

—Ggkhhrr.

Jolting back: a chair. Standing asudden: another Orderly knight, fuming at the cheeks. “Mareschal Tiselius!” he cried. “With all due respect, I cannot for the life of me share your fear of that foundling ungraced!”

“Aye to that,” agreed yet another leader. “And what of that weapon of his? Reports reveal little of its nature, and we can guess even less. But one thing sticks true: that black blade of his is but a *borrowed power*. What might it prove against so mighty a grace as Yoná’s? Hmph! *Naught*, I say!”

“Aha haha!” Tiselius laughed, earning baffled looks from the leadership, and especially from the knight who’d so gloated of our superiority.

“You hear a jest in my conjecture, madame?” he asked, shrill and offended.

“Jest? Why yes. Yes, I do. And naked mummery besides,” the hero-dame said. “For ‘tis *we* who brandish a borrowed power, is it not?”

“Upon my word...!” so riled the leaders, but no sooner did they then fall into a hush afore the pressing aura of the 1st’s mareschal, their faces sallowing from the ire congesting in their veins.

“*His* borrowed power trounces *ours*,” Tiselius asserted, “leaving us to fight back with naught but fist and foot—and to quail in confounded counsel as we do now.”

In the course of her words was Tiselius most serene, her hands gingerly clasped upon the high table, her smile gently glowing upon her mien. And after glancing through the speechless leaders, she spoke again, lightly, but lowly.

“Hm. *Jest*, indeed.”

“Mareschal Tiselius!” the chancellor thundered. “Have it clear! For whom is *your* borrowed power brandished!?” The lord’s voice, frayed with hoarseness—’twas rather jarring to see him so heated, as ever did he carry himself with measured patience.

“Why, for Londosius, of course,” Tiselius answered. “As should any knight of this realm.”

“Then act the part, will you!?” the chancellor barked.

“‘Part’? Is making light of an opponent the part of a proud Londosian knight?” Tiselius rebutted. “My dear Excellency, I but warn against gauging a foe more frail than he is.”

This none could argue. And indeed, none chanced it. The indignance of some amongst our leaders was such that they boiled in their seats, grinding their teeth and baring in full their animosity. Tiselius surely perceived the sight, but continued on as though it were but a passing breeze.

“Back to the straight, shall we?” she proposed. “To begin with, Balasthea was dealt a delivering hand by none other than this Rolf Buckmann. ‘Acting Commandant’—the day he assumed that very post was the day the sluice of victory was lifted.”

This, too, none debated. For to do so was to speak against the piles of reports attesting to this nigh-miracle.

“But come the day he flew a different flag did that sluice fall shut,” Tiselius went on. “Londosian might: *routed* at Hensen, *humiliated* at Balasthea. And now above all, *broken* at Arbel and *bereft* of Ström. Oh, how dread, indeed, the hand that mans the sluice.”

Like silk was her expression, her demeanour a portrait, her voice a melody. And yet was there an awe to Tiselius, looming and inimitable. Any here who had a mind for dissent well-felt this pressure, and looked silently upon the mareschal as a sailor looks upon black clouds towering over a yet-calm sea. Indeed, none dared stir as the hero-dame continued.

“And so are we settled on the keenness of Rolf Buckmann’s ken. But what of his mettle? His own might? Well, beyond any doubt, ‘tis a dear blunder to deem that black blade of his the only peril worth our worry. For dogged practice has honed its wielder to a wonder of deftness, that even could the Kōkūtós be cloven by him, the Igniēns Īcendō *sundered*. Fellow sword-devout as I am, I say this: still the tongue that scoffs his skill, lest he mark you another ‘magick’ to be *unmade*.”

All of this.

Aught and all of this did I myself wish to declare. That Rolf Buckmann is a man of amazement, a marvel of myriad

valour. Oh, how long I've yearned to reveal such worth to the world, for more than any other did I know of it, and just the same, rued that it should remain so reviled a secret.

Yet... yet on this day was I overtaken.

For 'twas by Tiselius' lips that Rolf was heeded at last.

...By lips that were none of mine.

What bitterness I knew then. For uncountable were the occasions when I proclaimed Rolf the better of us all, that much debt did we owe to his courage and counsel. Yet none in either Order or Central deigned to lend any ear. No matter how loudly I lauded him, how incessantly I insisted of him. No; Tallien, the Owlcranes, all of them—the one whom they championed instead was myself. As I was his superior and he my swain, so should Rolf's valour be as mine. Such was ever their argument.

Even after my promotion to mareschal did I persist. Whether it be suing for his rightful investiture, mandating against discrimination meted upon him, these and more I had endeavoured with all authority available to me.

Indeed, never did I abandon him.

Yet...

On and on, I went unheard. On and on, Rolf suffered.

And so, sat here as I was, in the citadel of Redelberne, in the very beating heart of the realm, I could not help but feel inferior as the Crown, the Cabinet, and the lions of Londosius heeded the hero-dame's every word and could bear no fang against them.

“Why, the Östbergs themselves fell in like fashion,” Tiselius reckoned. “Wager on it; your purse shall fatten with profit, I assure you.”

“Th-the Östbergs...!” stammered a leader. “On what basis stands your claim...!?”

“My *ken*,” was Tiselius’ reply, terse, yet more steeled than any armour... and more keen than any dagger, as in hearing it, my very heart felt smarted by some edge. For ‘twas *my ken* that knew more of Rolf than any other. As it should. As it... should...

“Stamp and scoff as you like,” Tiselius said, “but the fool who baulks the fury of Rolf Buckmann merely speeds the mercy stroke unto Londosius’s nape.”

“*Kh... nng...!*” so grumbled many of our leaders. They were all of them accomplished personages of the Order, knights and dames whose portraits could hang along royal walls without shame. And thus to be chastened so nakedly must be a first for them, not least afore so illustrious an audience as Her Highness, who watched on with all stoicism.

“...Your point is made well enough, Mareschal,” the chancellor said, grimacing. “But think next to soften its sting, will you?”

“Why, I’ve blunted the barb as best I could, Excellency,” returned Tiselius with a light gesture. “The Buckmanns themselves suffered a sharper sting, you ought know, when I met them on this selfsame matter. Indeed, I very well left the lord and lady a little too sore, though it shames me to say. But today ought find me better behaved, wouldn’t you agree?”

“That, the jury yet debates, I’m afraid,” the chancellor quipped. “Though grim seems the verdict; *‘jest’*, Mareschal? *‘Fool’*? You would do well to watch your words, at the very least. Such vitriol ill-becomes you.”

“Apologies, Chancellor,” Tiselius said passingly, before looking through the rest of us along the high table. “Now, then. What say my fellow Mareschals?”

The spotlight shifted asudden. Long distracted as I was, I could but inly fluster as I scrambled together a response.

“I am agreed,” Cromheim answered first. “If a wolf prowls the pasture, why, we ought slip every hound and hunter upon it, no?”

“For my part...” Juholt carefully spoke next. “Yes. We should indeed watch this wolf closely—just as we should shiver *not* in our boots. Stolid caution is but cowardice under cloak. No; we brace... and *strike*.”

With all the other mareschals spoken for, I felt then every eye in the great hall converge upon me. The weight of it could very well sink a ship, yet even then I managed to move my lips.

“Rolf...” I began, “...Rolf Buckmann is a man brilliant in both book and blade. A warrior wealthy of wit and wide of sight, he wields a will of steel.”

Seized at long last: a chance to tell of Rolf, and not afore indifferent souls as before, but the very eminences of Londosius themselves, not least the princess and the other mareschals. Would that this circumstance were different. That beside me sat Rolf, rightly renowned and decorated with all he is due, to be knighted on this day to the full pleasure of both Crown and Kingdom.

But nay. Today found me lauding him instead as...

"...An 'element' to be reckoned with," I slowly said. "Such excellence... makes this of him."

"Enemy"—the one word perhaps every ear had expected from my lips. And yet, 'twas a word I dared not air... not in describing Rolf, no. But then did I sense Her Highness searching my eyes. Her leaden-diamond regard, reaching deep down to decipher what inner strife might've shaped my answer.

I could but endure the scrutiny, till at last was it broken as the princess turned next to the hero-dame.

"Our Lady of Tiselius," Her Highness broached. "Thinkest thou vengeance be this man's bent?"

"Perhaps a question best left to another lady, Your Highness," answered Tiselius. "One such as the Mareschal Valenius: former superior to Rolf Buckmann... and his once-sworn *fiancée*."

Words, pricking like thorns beneath a rose. A tone wringing me taut, as though to tease out of me an answer to a question long unattended:

What've you been doing this entire time? Fiancée that you were?

"Lady Emilie?" The princess' voice struck like a tolling of a bell.

“...I think not, Your Highness,” I replied carefully. “Vengeance veers too far from his compass. I should guess his purpose lies elsewhere.”

That much I could vouch for. Through all the winters of our intimacy, never had I witnessed Rolf moved by aught as frivolous as vindictiveness. Not even during his time in the Order, when any lesser man might’ve given in to rancour and struck back at his offenders.

Offenders, much like one leader in this great hall, whose snorting at my answer stained the air. As for the princess, she but placed a hand upon her chin and pondered deeply of my words. To her side, the chancellor looked to us all and raised his voice.

“Now do we know our enemy,” he said. “Let us hence chart our course against him and his host.”

“To the viscounty of Tallien shall we dispatch the Order,” Her Highness then declared. “Our Lady of Valenius. Mightst thou and thy knights take up this task?”

A request made with eyes firmly upon me again. But in truth, ‘twas more a command. A command to strike down Rolf. A command to prove my loyalty. Just the thought of it twisted knots in my stomach... but there was nothing for it. The princess’ command was not to be disobeyed.

“The Lord Bartt Tallien was himself mareschal to the 5th Order; thou oughtst know him well enough, yes?” Her Highness pressed, sensing my silence. “Such acquaintance may succour. But moreover, with thy number was Rolf Buckmann most intimate; what better Order for the task, then, besides the 5th?”

“‘Tis... as you say, Highness,” I relented slowly. “The task shall be ours, if you so command.”

Here in this great hall, on occasion of this urgent council, was the princess invested with the prerogative of her father, the king of Londosius. And so was her word His Majesty’s, and His Majesty’s the will of the realm itself. Aface such royal imperative could I but oblige.

Just as powerlessness was beginning to numb my very thoughts, there resounded next a voice heard now for the first time.

“Your Royal Highness, Princess Serafina. If I may so humbly speak.”

Whence did those words come than from right beside me; the voice of Sir Edgar, the newly appointed Chief Adjutant to the 5th Order.



“You...” Her Highness said, scarce above a whisper, “... thou art... Bailon—Sir Edgar Bailon, yes? Pray speak at thy liking. We are met here for counsel; if thou givest, so shall we lend ear.”

“You are most gracious, Highness,” my adjutant bowed.

An upright man, this Sir Edgar. He wore his forty and some winters on his crown of grey-speckled hair. If memory serves, his précis listed six years of service in the 4th, as well as a long-spanning tenure in Central thereafter.

“As the Mareschal Valenius’ chief adjutant, it is with regret that I measure our knights of the 5th ill-advantaged in this operation,” he stated clearly, before turning a glance my way, as though to beg leave in continuing on. I nodded. “Like as not...” he started again, “...our foes, the endemic Víly, shall soon make of their victory a token in persuading alliance from the neighbouring Nafílim.” A most probable development, one earning audible agreement from Juholt himself. “In such case, meagrest of the Orders as we are, I fear our number would march to their unmaking, needless as it is certain.”

Five years past, when Rolf and I were yet sproutlings in the Order... ‘twas then that he offered me this key counsel:

‘...Strategy is the stroke of a brush... Tactics, the swing of a sword...’

Words that rang like a prophecy in our battles together, but much more so for the virtues of the former.

‘...Ten moves decide the day... yet only two are played on the battlefield...’

By his reasoning, then, we the 5th ought refuse this battle, if even before the march do we deem ourselves ill-steeled for the jaunt and joust.

“And such accounts not another rub: distance,” Bailon continued. “To wit, the span betwixt headquarters and battlefield both. Suffice it to say, the 5th’s home at Norden is much too far from Tallien.”

He had the right of it. Norden straddled the royal capital, whilst the viscounty of Tallien was situated where else but anear a far march of the realm. None could doubt that indeed a vast expanse laid between the two territories.

Why, 'twas a week's time that Felicia herself had spent to reach the western fringeland of Ström, neighbour to Tallien—and by carriage, no less. What languor would await an entire Order, then, were they to march afoot? Much the same as our expedition to the Erbelde three years past, surely...

“As per today's proceedings, we now know our foes to be shrewd in strategy. No doubt they shall bring to bear a fatal brunt upon any force so fatigued by a long march,” concluded Bailon.

“Thy reason resoundeth,” Her Highness conceded. “A closer Order should prove meter for our purposes; such be thy thought, Sir Edgar?”

“Precisely so, Princess,” Bailon nodded. “But preciser still: Your Highness' observation, for indeed amongst us the humble 5th are those quite acquainted with the Viscount Tallien and our dear rebel. Much momentum might such associates confer to the thrust of this operation.”

“Mm... Facility and familiarity; two swords swung as one, and with nary a need to send a force in full,” the princess summarised. “What thinkest thou of this, Lady of Valenius?”

“...I am agreed, Highness,” I said, pressed by her gaze. “By your royal command, I shall send at the soonest an associate most available. Mayhaps one amongst my Owlcranes shall best serve.”

To this, Her Highness nodded in consent. Gerd, Raakel, Sheila—whom should be tasked was a decision for another hour, as this one found me yet too occupied with fraught thoughts of Rolf.

“Now, as to the Order destined for Tallien—Lord Hugo?” said the princess.

“Yes, Highness,” answered the chancellor. “If closeness be the main criterion, I should measure the 2nd Order most mete for the task. Only...”

“...Only, they are much preoccupied at present,” Her Highness finished for him.

Currently were the lands about the 2nd... insecure, to say the least. What’s more, there was growing concern that the Víly’s triumph might galvanise Nafílim hostility. For the 2nd to now march from their post, then, would be to leave their home as a babe in the woods.

“My dearest apologies, Highness,” Cromheim bowed.

“It is an ill-helped matter,” said the princess. “But if not the 2nd...”

“Then we the 3rd,” answered Juholt. A subtle smirk was on his lips, and in his eyes, the glint of confidence. No objections were aired... ‘twas decided, then. The 3rd Order would march to Tallien, and there face the Nafílim threat.

Sir Matthias Juholt—a knight of unchallenged surety, a tree fortress-like, whose very shade is as a shield against all peril. A shield soon to meet Rolf’s sword...

And so were the pieces chosen, the board set. Though I was left with nary a breath of relief in my lungs, at the very least, I felt some weight lifted from my shoulders, to know that this ill council was nearing its end...

“If I may.”

...or so I thought.

“Sir Erik,” the princess confirmed. “Speak.”

Erik Lindell, Knight Lieutenant to the Owlcranes of the 1st. Verily had he presented himself afore me as an aspirant to the post of chief adjutant not long ago. That Bailon was sat beside me now should tell well of my decision in that matter. And just the same, that Lindell himself was yet amidst the 1st’s retinue should tell of his end.

“This humble knight has known the viscount for many winters,” Lindell revealed with a bow. “We are as brothers, I daresay.”

“Oh,” the chancellor muttered, as though recalling for himself the same fact. “Indeed, you have both got such a bond, haven’t you?”

‘...Erik and I are well-acquainted...’—the words of Tallien himself, sure enough, uttered on the final night of our march to the Erbelde.

“Ever has the Lord Bartt treated me with much cheer and charity; if he should be destined for dire straits, so should I like to lend my oar and deliver him from such danger,” said Lindell. “Your Royal Highness. Pray, grant me leave to be by his side in this terrible time.”

“We see no need to prevent such valour,” answered the princess. “So be it. Leave shall be thine—if given as well by thy fair Mareschal.”

“‘Tis so, Highness,” nodded Tiselius.

Thus ended the exchange. Much violence had Lindell once wrought upon Rolf; that the two might meet again

upon the battlefield stirred no small boding in me.

“Then are we decided,” said the princess. “Riding to Tallien shall be Sir Matthias Juholt and his knights of the 3rd Order, there to smite the Nafílim menace. Joining them shall be Sir Erik Lindell, to lead and succour at need. Whilst from the 5th shall be dispatched an officer of the Lady Emilie Valenius’ bidding, to serve as associate adviser to the Viscount Tallien and bane to the rebel, Rolf Buckmann,” Her Highness summarised at length. “This council is adjourned. Godspeed, ye knights, and may Her grace guideth you true. Long live Londosius.”

The great hall thundered as we stood at once from our seats.

“Long live Londosius!”

A salute in unison, and a sendoff to the grimmest council in all my time in the Order.

†

“Forgive me, madame,” said Bailon with a slight bow. We were headed back to the royal inn. The air was heavy inside the driving carriage. Twilight blazed through the windows; the day had been long.

“‘Tis all right,” I said, shaking my head. Like as not, my adjutant yet felt it a transgression to have counselled Her Highness without my prior consent. “I never had the spirit for this operation, at any rate.”

'Twas the bare truth. Why, if aught, / should be thanking him, really, as for the time being, it meant not having to cross arms with Rolf. Yet the alternative gave little relief, for 'twas Juholt and the 3rd who would march in our place. Just the idea of it had my heart on the tenters.

What I ought say, what I ought do from hereon out... I knew not. Not at all. Down the royal avenue we drave, yet amidst all the motion, I felt myself at a strange standstill, trapped in a circle of thoughts.

"...Pardon, Sir Edgar," Felicia said. "Has aught come concerning the horse?"

Her voice sounded strained, as though wrung out of much brooding. Nay... not "as though"; she truly had been brooding, lost in reflection for days on end. She'd fought her dear brother, after all... and returned with a wound from his blade.

...What has become of our world? *What?* How blissful we were, till not more than five winters past. Our many springs beside the ravines, our summers upon the meadows, our falls under the foliage. Was it all but a dream? More and more, it seemed so. More and more, I felt left behind by all the change, by all the haste about me.

Rolf trouncing magicks, his bitter bane—a cause for celebration, if true. And naught short of a miracle, even for a marvel as he. Yet... hardly inconceivable, knowing him. Oh, would he were here today. I should like to congratulate him, and rain upon him all the praise and merriment as my voice and vigour would allow.

But he wasn't. And neither could he be.

For he's turned his back to the realm, brandished his sword against his own sister, and declared to her his full foeship.

What was his mind? Truly?

Very much did I wish to meet him. To share words. To understand at last. Yet, just the same... just the same was I afraid to do so. Horribly, horribly afraid.

And so did Bailon earn my thanks. Not for a while, at least, must the 5th march against one of their former own. Escapism, I know. But nevertheless, I was grateful for this borrowed time.

Waging battle against Rolf... never must such a reckoning come to pass. But should it... I feel my heart would be broken forevermore.

"The inquiry proceeds," Bailon answered Felicia. "However, it has been months since the incident; as yet, we've uncovered no clue as to the hand behind the horse's disappearance... My deepest apologies, Brigadier."

"Nay, I ought apologise, as well," Felicia returned, shoulders sinking. "Already I've troubled you much on this matter..."

'Twas not more than a week ago when Felicia had returned. But after she'd given her report, our meeting did not end there. No, there in the privacy of my chamber, I then gave her a report of my own: Maria's story. And therefore, the innocence of her dear brother and the injustice that was his exile.

I remember well Felicia's state when all was told. She but remained sat, still as stone, her eyes lost of all light as

they seemed to gaze away at some ghost. And no matter how much I called to her, no answer came... save the tremblings upon her lips, through which passed whispers beyond all hearing. Moments of this silence dragged on, till 'twas broken at last by a slow turn of her head. To me she looked, and with a shadow deepening in the fathoms of her eyes, asked me thus:

*'...Then... then who...?
...Who was it that set the horse loose...?'*

Thereafter I relaunched an inquiry into this very matter, with Bailon at the helm. He seemed most appropriate for the effort on account of impartiality, given that not yet was he a presence in the 5th at the time of the incident. And from then on has Felicia, at every arisen opportunity, been pressing Bailon for even the slightest development. And seeing her so desperate, a thought grew in me: should the day ever come when the truth is given to her...

...what would she do?

Such a question I had yet the courage to ask.



The 5th headquarters. In a leaders' lounge were they sat.

Fair of face and combed of corn-gold hair: Gerd Kranz, the spellblade.

With sinews like a sculpture and locks like a blaze: Raakel Nyholm, warrior of magicks.

And the buxom beauty belied by a smile innocent and serene: Sheila Larsen, the surgien.

Night was fallen. With their duties done, the Owlcranes had flocked for some respite before retiring for the day. The moment found them in the midst of merriment: a game of tarot and a bottle of spirits besides to milden the mood. And what a fine spirit it was: golden like a late-summer sunset, the liquor listed lazily in tinnen cups of fine, inlaid filigree.

“Such a lovely thing that meets my lips,” Sheila remarked, letting down her cup upon the table.

“You like?” said Gerd, taking a sip himself before studying the drink. “*‘Uisce beatha’* they call it. A barley spirit—and all the rage in Redelberne, of late.” The lounge was lit little, and so as he mused, soft yet deep-set shadows played upon the spellblade’s face.

“Well, it wafts nice to me nose, it does, but...” Raakel returned, “...it’s a mite priggish-like ‘pon the palate, if ye pardon me meanin’.”

Gerd smirked. “‘Ain’t in a tankard, ain’t to me taste’, is it?”

“*Peh*,” Raakel sputtered. “Never said it ain’t.”

Booze ought be swigged than sipped, was Raakel’s motto, and so never could the lustrous liquid have earned

her love. Gerd and Sheila, for their part, quite enjoyed the drink, if their dainty delighting in served any sign.

“My dear Miss Raakel,” Sheila began with pity, “no banquet would deign to serve the alehouse fare you so fancy. And yet banquets are your favourite occasion, are they not? Acquiring a taste or two ought do you a fine favour there.”

“Yea? Well ‘ere’s a taste fer ye to acquire, *Miss Sheila*,” Raakel quipped, before slapping down a card upon the table: *Cornū Sōlis*, the Horn of the Sun. And true to its name, it heralded the loss of Sheila’s every jeton.

“Oh, no!” the surgien gasped. “How cruel!”

“Aye,” Gerd sighed, watching the warrior giddily gather up her boon of tokens. “The fates’ve found their pet for the night, eh? How long’s her lead over you now, Sheila? Two?”

“Three, soon,” Raakel sooner answered, smiling at her new horde.

Of the trio, Gerd had the greater gift for the game, and so could not help but raise a brow at Raakel’s triumphant streak. A seldom sight, truly, one stunning the surgien no less.

“What shame...” Sheila sighed, “...though mine ought be the better brain for this.”

“Ey! I’ll belt ‘em brains out, I will,” Raakel snapped, raising her hand, but then deciding instead to flex the arm. “*Brawn*—thass the winnin’ secret ‘ere!”

“At this rate, she might be onto something, Sheila,” Gerd remarked.

Such banter continued, and more and more of the booze they imbibed. Even Raakel, though at first misliking the stuff, eventually found it fair upon her tongue. Perhaps the spice of victory had much to do with it. Indeed, as her winnings waxed, so did the smile upon her lips as she slurped down the sumptuous spirit.

“Well now,” said Sheila, “any word yet from Miss Emilie?”

Raakel’s mirth vanished. “Oi, come on,” she grumbled. “Leave work fer the morrow, aye? Merrymakin’s what’s on the menu tonight—an’ the wine o’ winnin’!”

“Stole the words right from my mouth,” Gerd said to Raakel, but then turned to Sheila. “...All’s quiet as yet.”

Long on their minds was Emilie, who at this moment was summoned to the royal capital. Though such a trip was hardly seldom, something was amiss this time around: grim seemed the summons given, and just as grimly answered. As part of the Order leadership, the three Owlcranes could but sense some darkness was afoot.

“...Balasthea’s done in real, innit?” Raakel broached. “Pity. It were winnin’ left an’ right, the fort.”

“I worry more for our dear mareshal, truth be told,” said Sheila.

“Aye to that,” Gerd echoed, quiet.

It had not been so long since the stronghold of Balasthea was brought to its knees. But when tidings of it had reached Emilie’s ears, what warmth and sunniness that yet remained in her mien were lost all at once. And to the Owlcranes’ keen eyes, not since then has she regained

either of them, for posted to that selfsame stronghold was none other than her former fiancé.

A post of punishment, imparted by whose hand but Emilie's very own.

"Nevertheless, our little swain is like to have left this coil," reckoned Sheila, "...and with him, the chains fettering Miss Emilie, I should hope."

"Who's to say..." murmured Gerd.

"Oh?" Sheila blinked at him. "Think you Miss Emilie yet yearns for her old flame?"

"Hm? Nay, it's not that," answered Gerd, half-startled, but after a moment's thought, "...no. Pay me no mind." He looked down at his cup again and stared into the amber reflections within. Before long, his lips slowly parted once more. "There's the brigadier, as well," he said. "The Lady Felicia—she earns my other worry."

"Aye. The li'l lass look'd right fray'd-like, innit?" Raakel concurred. And indeed, the daughter of House Buckmann had seemed mired—morose, even, following her return from Ström. "Maybe she's got a gander o' the berk's cold body? He were her brother, sure 'nough. Must've left 'er in pieces, the sight o' him."

"Perhaps so," said Sheila. "Our dear mareschal herself seemed quite fractured after Miss Felicia's report. Mm, curious..."

"Whichever the way, we'll know for certain soon enough," said Gerd, to which the other two nodded.

What a storm of activity it was that had followed the brigadier's report, soon after which found Emilie setting off asudden to Redelberne.

'...I-I'm sorry...' she had said to the Owlcranes. '... There's too little that I can say... for now, at least... But let us talk for sure upon my return...'

This was an exigency, no doubt, if not yet could Emilie sooner discuss behind the walls of the Order than the chambers of Central. There was, as well, the original summons, one set to address the fall of Balasthea. But thereafter had something transpired that warranted an immediate council at the capital... one bidding the presence of Felicia.

There was nothing for it; great wheels had been set in motion. This Gerd prevised, for between the Owlcranes and their mareschal was stone-solid trust, that ever willing was the latter to discuss any matter on her mind. Most ominous, then, was this speed, this silence.

Gerd let out a long, slow breath. Undulating under dim light was his golden drink, in which drowned yet again his wordless stare.

"I feel a bit frayed myself, to be frank," Sheila confessed. "Our little swain was a hulking heathen, that is certain. And yet... yet I see much to be pitied about him."

"I mislikes weak ones, I does," said Raakel. "Weak ones like the addle-pate 'imself. But if ye asks me: were he pit'ful, that alleyway pup? Hm. Aye, prob'ly."

Pity for the apostate; oh, indeed, were the two women airing something to that effect. Their tongues were tinged with the usual scorn, of course, but to more acquainted

ears, their tone might have sounded more softened, or sympathetic, even—perhaps by fault of the sodden hour.

Were he no heretic.

Were he a fellow knight, fast and valiant.

Another Owlcrane comrade to call their own.

Then...

Nay. The fruitless thought was let be, for none of the three nurtured the same warmth of mind as Emilie's. Nevertheless, such thoughts, such fancies had, in truth, visited theirs on more than one past occasion.

"Thinkin' 'bout it, that adjutant bus'ness—weren't it just some front to bring the berk back?" Raakel guessed.

"So it seemed," Gerd answered flatly.

"But the bait ended up rotted on the snare," continued Raakel. "What were it whirlin' in 'is pate, I wonders? Runnin' an' runnin'—thass all 'e's done, aye? Maybe he thought it'd blow over meanwhiles? The reek 'e's roused at the hearin', that is."

"Then alas: away from the snare and into the maw," Sheila summarised. "A shame. Twenty winters lived—all for what?"

She sighed. But no sooner did a knock then play upon the door. Gerd bade the knocker enter. In came a knight, who, declaring his bearing a message from the mareschal, handed to Gerd a scroll. Taking it, the spellblade confirmed Emilie's seal upon the parchment.

To the knight he then nodded. “Dismissed,” he said, to which the knight obliged. Privacy restored, Gerd next unsealed the scroll and scanned through the contents therein.

The silence stretched on, in which while Gerd’s regard grew grim.

“A prank, innit? Some love letter or summat?” Raakel jested, perhaps to lighten the air—and unravel the unreadable furrows upon Gerd’s brows.

He scoffed. “Nay. A notice, Owlcranes,” Gerd said darkly. “We’re to set out soon. But as to the ‘where’ and ‘why’—that, Emilie would like to discuss after she’s returned.”

“To take back Balasthea, I presume?” Sheila guessed, looking into her own cup. “But Arbel has men in spades... Why send for the Order, I wonder?” She then ventured another sip, but halted as soon as a new thought sparked in her mind. “...Nay... unless...”

“‘Unless’, indeed,” Gerd answered, setting down the scroll. “If what’s writ here be true, then... forget Arbel—Ström itself is lost.”



The viscounty of Tallien. West Londosius.

Beside a busy street stood a building, like an old and upright loaf of bread, encrusted in tired and dusty masonry. Yet more to it there was than meets the eye, for this was the

very guildhall to the mercenaries of this land. And as one might imagine, the lion's share of the patrons passing through its doors were of the roguish persuasion: rough at the edges and edged to the roots, to put it brightly. There, coming out: a scowling brute, bald-pated and bristle-bearded. Shoving him aside: another knave, with nary a shirt over his shoulders, as though to gloat of the gash-scar running across his bare, hulking bosom.

Mind not the ensuing brawl between them, and inside would one find the usual bustle, brimming with mercenaries on business and banter-making. Though myriad were their miens, the soldiers-of-fortune all shared the same shimmer in their eyes, like the glint of a razor blade or the glare of a feline, livid and like to lash at any moment. And lash they did, for as outside, so inside: scuffles and fisticuffs were had on the daily here, and today seemed no different. Above the background of grunts, grumbles, and guffaws, there thundered voices virulent: two many-muscled men were at it, clutching each other's collars and screaming into each other's eyes.

"Spits that 'gain an' I'll spits ya through to the 'ilt, I will!!"

"Not 'fore I nips ya knickers-sniffin' knob off!!"

The very air shuddered under their ire. But as to the "why" of their wildness, none of the others in that parlour knew, nor had a particular care for even if they had done.

Save, that is, for one unenviable soul.

"Gentles, gentles!" came a cry. "Come, let's be civil, shall we!"

Common, certainly, were such commotions. But this guild had an operation to run, and roughhousing was not to be suffered. And so beside the two brutes appeared a young man, one of many clerks to this establishment, hopelessly hoping to halt the squabble. A pity, then, that he went wholly unheeded, for the heat between the brutes only burgeoned from there on.

“Ya beggin’ for an’ early grave, *mate!*” screamed one.

“Not as early as yours, *coz!*” screamed the other. “When I spades it with that *splint* ya fancies a sword!”

“N-n-n-no no no!” stammered the guild clerk. “Not here, men! No scraps, no scuffles, no spars on guild premises...!”

The clerk then yelped asudden, for bared now between the firebrands were blades live and ready to let rip. Alas, what was to be a usual dispute seemed tottering towards an unusual disaster.

“Time t’dance, dung-licker!!”

Lost were their marbles, these two, as was the colour on the clerk’s face as he blanched back from the bloody clash to come. But just before things could boil over, stepping into the scene was a new figure.

“Time to sit, you mean.”

Its words: soft, yet stern. Its intervention: valiant, and yet ill-advised. For these were brutes with bulging veins and volcanic blades; two bears in a bout, between whom none of right mind ought mingle. Passing strange, then, that the selfsame bout stood now in silent suspension.

Indeed, with blades yet held aloft, the brutes turned to the intruding figure.

And felt upon their cheeks a chilling sweat.

“O... *ofh...*” one gulped.

“M... mornin’ to ya, Frieda,” the other whispered ditheringly.

The figure affrighting them was but a woman, slender and delicate, a twig afore the two bough-like brutes. Yet she only sighed at them, and brushing aside her shoulder-length locks of amber, gave them both a hard look.

“‘Mornin’,’ you say?” she echoed. “Fancyin’ some blades for brekkie, I take it?”

“N-no, ma’am... We er... we gots a mite too ‘ot an’ ‘airy-like, we did. Heh...”

“A-aye, that! B-bad boys we is, *bad!* This be, er, g-guild prem’ses! Ain’t no place for swashbucklin’, oh no no!”

The two then sheepishly apologised to this Frieda, all the while averting their eyes like two urchins caught amidst some mischief. And once their blades were full-sheathed, the quivering clerk scrambled up beside Frieda with a most grateful gaze.

“Oh, bless you, Frieda!” he cried. “You could not’ve come any sooner! I was right ‘fraid we’d have ‘nother mash to mop up...”

“Think naught o’ it. Now,” Frieda said, turning next to the hotheads, “what in heavens were you two cats croakin’ ‘bout?”

“Ah...” the slightly braver brute began, “...eh, ahah! It uh, er, we was ehm... i-it weren’t nothin’, really. J-jus’ er... jus’ pickin’ ‘tween wot’s better! A woman, wearin’ smalls or eh... the *wind*... as they says. Heheh.”

“Handsome hills to die on,” Frieda quipped, squinting her eyes sharply before giving another sigh. “A woman wears what she damn’d well wishes, an’ that’s that.”

“Yea! Exact as me thinkin’!” the two answered in unison. And then, yet blissfully unashamed and sweating down the ridges of their rugged faces, the brutes broke a simper and blathered on.

“S-so er... w-wot ‘bout you, eh Frieda? You er...” one ventured, “...you wearin’ the wind?”

“Flyin’ free-like’s the fad ‘mongst maidens as yourself!” the other giggled.

Frieda stamped her foot. “Blow that ‘wind’ any woman’s way ‘gain an’ I’ll have your heads ‘flyin’ free-like’, I will!”

“S-s-s-ssorry, ma’am!” stuttered the left brute, pressing his palms together in prayer.

“I-it’s ‘igh time we shog’d, innit!” yelled the right. “F-fair day to ya, Frieda!”

About-facing, the brutes sprang away, but no sooner did they make two strides than were they stopped full by Frieda’s voice.

“Hold ‘em hamhocks,” she hissed at their backs. “Don’t be thinkin’ I’m blind to the chinks an’ chips on your falchions. Haven’t I told you a hundred times ‘fore? A happy tool today—”

“—doubles the coin t’orrow!” the brutes yipped together. Turning back to Frieda, they stood at attention, entirely sapped of all the ire raging only moments before.

“Very good,” Frieda nodded. “Now get yourselves to the smith’s, lest you like livin’ one chip ‘way from trouble, you hear?”

“Th-that we wills, ma’am!”

“J-jus’ ease ‘em eyes o’ yours, can ya? Else I sleeps bad t’night!”

Sore from the scolding, the two men then bowed and quit the guildhall, the pathetic pucker on their faces scarce wearing off till many a stride down the street. Yet without mistake, somewhere in their miens sang a tinge of mirth. Frieda’s words had been as barbs upon their ears, sure, but deep down inside, the men understood very well that she would not have admonished them so if not for her genuine worry for their wellbeing. Such was not lost to the surrounding sellswords, who, having witnessed the scene, returned to their businesses with warmth in their eyes.

They were all of them quite fond of this Frieda, for she was, to them, a beacon lit by strength itself, inspiring and awe-sparking. Yet in such light did they feel, too, the glow of her good and honest nature. Theirs was a cruel, cutthroat industry, after all, and more or less did they deal with death on the daily. And so for a fellow freelance like Frieda to show a sincere care for them was worth more than the finest coin or the fattest coffer.

“Oi,” whispered a sproutling of a sellsword sat in a corner. “Who’s that bird? She’s a proper belle if I’ve ever seen one. Wot’s a man gots to do to spend a night with ‘er, ey?”

"Hemph. She's out o' your league, mate. An' even if she weren't, I reckons you'll spend the night on the barber's table 'fore ya spends a minute on 'er bed, if ya catches me drift," answered a veteran sat anear. "Take a gander; ya makes a move on Frieda, ya makes an en'my out o' all the gentles ya sees 'ere."

Frieda was ever a force to be reckoned with, and withal a name heard by many ears. But of late was she even more so: keener was her blade, and in the words of those with an eye for subtlety, she now showed more petals to her personhood, as it were.

About half a year prior had the freelance been involved in an incident in another province. To wit: the prosecution and arrest of the lord and son of House Albeck for the sin-steeped tragedies wrought deep in their manor. The whole adventure seemed to have sparked some change in Frieda, for very soon after her return, she began plying herself with a fervour never before seen in all her years. And so, as they say, the rest was history: with industry most diligent, Frieda earned merit after merit over the following moons, becoming an even brighter lodestar within her circles.

And as well, an object of adoration amongst her more... "lusty" colleagues, if their bawdy breaths were aught to go by.

"Right then," said the guild clerk, "what bus'ness've you got today, my good Frieda?"

"Ah. Remember the reek what's been harryin' the highstreet? Well, thieves in the thick o' night they were," Frieda reported to him. "Had 'em all roped an' rounded up easy-like, an' now they're brewin' in the bailiffs'."

“The bailiffs’, you said? Already?” the clerk returned with brows raised high. “*Hwoh!* Speedy as ever, eh Frieda!”

A blush bloomed upon his face. Hearing of Frieda’s triumphs, if even on the daily, seemed ever the delight of his day.

But the freelance herself only sighed. “They’ll be wantin’ for gaol space, I’m ‘fraid: more worms to this wood than I’d like,” she continued with some concern. “Remember, too, the ruffians lordin’ it over in doss-town? Well, the ones I busted might’ve been lads from their lot, caught right in the middle o’ warmin’ up—to make ‘nother hold out o’ the highstreet someday. Goodness knows how long they’ve been keen on it.”

“Ah. The pieces do fit, I’ll give you that,” the clerk nodded. “Duly noted, then. The guild’ll have eyes on it, I assure you.”

With that, the clerk began scribbling intently upon a notebook from his pocket. But upon finishing, he looked up, and there Frieda found in his eyes a rather disarming greyness. After a quick glance about, the clerk leant close to her, and cupping his mouth, said:

“Frieda, have you heard tell? The sky’s fallen—down on Ström, that is.”



The lightness in Frieda’s face, too, was now swiftly lost.

“I have,” she answered. “It’s hard believin’, but I’ll hear your take, if you’ve got one.”

A rumour had been roving about since the morrow of that day. “Ström is destroy’d,” many said. “Our neighbour—fallen to Nafílim fiends,” others added with a shudder. Too grave for gossip this was, but though mirthless were the mouths that passed such tidings, the ears that heard them were yet hard-convinced. Not that they could be blamed, for never in Londosius’ history had any of its lands been lost to the foe. Still, such a precedent ill-soothed the serious look on the clerk’s face.

“That I do,” he whispered back. “It’s real—and confirmed.”

“Confirm’d...” Frieda echoed, crossing her arms. “Int’restin’ times we live in now, innit...”

“And we’re next, from the look of things,” the clerk said, nodding slowly.

To which Frieda frowned. “Li’l wonder why the town’s on edge...”

War was at their doorstep; the thought had been embering in Frieda’s mind throughout the day ever since she had eavesdropped the first whispers, but to hear it now from the clerk himself left her voice quieted with unease. Still, battle was her bread and butter, her very livelihood, and so, though quieted she may have been, her shoulders yielded not a shiver.

“Bus’ness’ll be boomin’ for us, you reckon?” Frieda asked wryly, wondering now if the sword girt at her hip would someday be bidden to stay the tide.

“Hmm... that I wonder,” said the clerk, thoughtfully holding his chin. “The lord has got no love for our lot, after all. Or so I’ve heard.”

“And we, him,” Frieda returned. No warmth was in her voice.

“We *and* the fiefsfolk,” nodded the clerk. “But that ought be left on the down-low, if you get my meaning.”

The clerk then forced a half-smile. For her part, Frieda showed no change. Prudence was her principle, for certain, as proven by her pacification of the prior squabble. Yet such prudence dared not dip its toes into the tar-pit of utter pragmatism, that Frieda would be so fain to curry any favour from the more... *nefarious* sorts of Londosian society, even should they entice her much reward. Hence why she took quite the dim view of the viscount of this land. Indeed, he was, to her, a man of foul regard, a rapacious rakehell, one whom she hated with no hesitation.

“Thing is, the lord’s something of a, erm... *pet* of Central, one could say,” the clerk whispered with shuddering shoulders. True enough, the viscount had once served as mareschal to the Order, in which time he ventured not the lightest tug against Central’s leash. No doubt, then, that between them ran pipes wide and unclogged, as it were. “So like as not...” the clerk whispered on, “...the knights’ll be getting involved, and soon.”

“From candle to conflagration,” Frieda remarked with a dusking look upon her face.

For whom and for what, the freelance knew not, but at the very least, half the answer was now made clear to her: her sword would, indeed, be made to strike. Reason backed this little, for it was but a guess of the gut. Yet Frieda lived

by battle, and in such matters, no guess of hers was to be gainsaid.

“Tell me,” she spoke again, “might there be more to this yarn?”

“There is, but naught I can speak to yet,” answered the clerk. “Though the inspectors over at Roland are putting together a report, meanwhile. Our guild ought be requesting some transcripts soon; I can save you one, if you’d like, Frieda.”

“Please, an’ thank you,” the freelance said before drawing a deep breath. “Mighty swift, the Rolanders. Impressive, really, if I’m honest.”

“Coin quickens a merchant more than it does a mercen’ry, I’m ‘fraid,” said the clerk, chuckling halfheartedly. But not a moment sooner did heavy steps groan close. There then appeared a different man, though “different” not in the fullest meaning, for this bloke seemed much like the two that had turned tail earlier: a scar darkened his cheek, whilst the rest of his body brimmed with throbbing thews.

“Frieda!” he cried with a gaping grin and outstretched arms. “Fancy meetin’ you ‘ere! Oh—that trick ya teach’d me the other day. Guess wot? Got meself bit by some elderburs while in the weeds, I did, but your stuff—it work’d *wonders*, aye!”

Frieda looked up, returning the smile. “Got the bane out o’ you, has it? Chuff’d to hear it.”

“A-aye!” said the man, who then began scratching his hackles nervously. “So ehr... I-I were thinkin’, ‘ow ‘bout a mug or two, ey? On me! As thanks-like!”

Quickly, he pleaded with palms together, but the clap that sounded from them was as a thundercry, as many seats in the parlour were then struck aside and many more feet stamped asudden.

“Oi, shog on out o’ ‘ere!” one voice vaulted above the new commotion. “Frieda ain’t got no time for your tiny knob!”

“Wot’s that!?” the man roared back. “Crossin’ ‘tween me an’ the fair lady, ain’t ya!?”

A rush of muscles and motion, and soon were two men tussling again, clawing and catching each other’s collars, tugging and tottering this way and that. Chairs tumbled, dust danced; with a gasp, the clerk fumbled forth to stop the new fight.

Frieda but sighed at the sight with a sidelong look and shrugged. “A bunch o’ berks, them...” she muttered. “When’s a more cultured cove ever goin’ to come ‘round, I wonder...”

And just as she aired those words, the image of a manful figure flickered in her mind.

One she had met moons before in her flight from the Albeck manor.

†

Flowers swayed afire under fair noonlight. Countless colours listing to and fro, as frothed and flowed fountain

waters down sun-dappled channels. A gentle, eternal churning, bedight with chirps and cheers of little birds from their topiary perches and houses of hedges jutting high.

The splendour of Londosius, full-displayed in this royal garden of Redelberne. Beneath the looming and illuminant palace, amidst manicured banks of brilliant blossoms and marble balustrades, there stood two figures.

One was the princess herself: Serafina Demeter Londosius, with her gaze of graceful grey and locks of silver scintillating in the sun.

And the other: a man in his seeming forties, with a face most infrequently found on the palace premises.

“Well now,” he said, “how might this lowly yeoman serve Your Highness?”

“‘Yeoman’?” the princess repeated, her pale and perfect back yet turned to the man. “A rather humble term for so high a post as a mareschal’s hand...” Whom was she addressing but the new adjutant to the Mareschal Valenius: Edgar Bailon. Ostensibly an officer of Central for many winters, it was at the recently held royal council where he had made his presence full-known. “Thy transfer, thine enterprise,” Serafina said on, “naught hath not gone unpried by *this* princess. Pray thee, tell me this: what be it *now* that moveth thy mind?”

“My mind?” Edgar began his benign answer. “Why, my mind is merely to avail this new age—and its nascent hero-dame.” Then with a bow, “And withal, Your Royal Highness and this holy realm of Londosius.”

“...So thou sayest,” Serafina murmured.

“My hope such words were to your satisfaction, Princess,” Edgar followed. “But might that be all?”

In truth, his “hero-dame” was already homebound with her retinue. It would be a short while yet before Edgar himself could follow her back to the 5th headquarters, as on this peculiar occasion, he had been singularly summoned by the princess, who now shook her head slightly.

“Nay,” she said. “Another matter biddeth thee answer.”

Edgar bowed again. “Then answer, I shall.”

Serafina stood silent. Seldomly did any emotion mar her doll-like features. But turning at last to Edgar, such seldom emotion was now full-bare for his eyes to see. Bright and brimming: the emotion that is “anger”.

“What ploy is it?” the princess asked sharply. “That thou... that *you* play now?”

“...Whatsoever might you mean, my Princess?” Edgar asked back, smooth and not in the least daunted.

For a young woman as wise as she, Serafina’s question was indeed uncalled for. Still, when Edgar gave his most expected answer, the princess could but cast her eyes down... and clutch at the pleats of her skirt. Such was the strength in her trembling hands that the fine tinsel and satin very nearly squealed under her squeeze. Then, as though bursting at the seams, Serafina flashed her face forth and bore down upon Edgar a livid glare.

“How much longer!?” she cried. “How much longer will you pretend the part of ‘Edgar Bailon’!?”

The veritable scream echoed under the cloudless sky. Nearby birds all took wing, escaping the woe woven in the princess' words. A long-mulled lament, all let upon this unassuming man, who answered with naught but silence and eyes coldly closed. The lull endured. Only wind and water dared any sound, till at last, Edgar lifted open his eyes...

...and smiled.

Soft and serene, a smile most beseeming of the sun and flowers all about.

A smile, affable... and fearsome.

Credits

EPUB/PDF:

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Translation:

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