Prologue: Day Zero

Bitter disgust and salt stained the flavor of Vira's venison. And it was much too gamey. She ate it anyway, hoping it might distract her from the less-than-desirable status of Enid's raid on Caveel. Her father (the mighty King Osrin, the Belaborer, hater of many and fearer of few) surely wouldn't notice, his voice carrying across the table enough for the entire kingdom. She met Willem's eyes briefly, who sent an audacious smirk her way. She hoped, for her own attitude more than his sake, that his face had simply twitched.

She picked at the flaking skin of her lips and trained her attention on what might come next. Salekath will certainly retaliate against them. Willem had warned their triumph in South Panatry was not a call for Enid to strike as well. Yet, since Osrin demonstrated to the world that Halos was now a force to be reckoned with against magic, Enid wanted to join in on that intoxicating victory against Saleketh as well. Now, of course in light of this mistake, she agreed that they weren't quite ready to man a unified position on the world stage. Yet, no matter how many times she mapped it out in her head, she couldn't decide which was worse: extinguishing the fire while it was hot, or letting it burn uncontrollably big. Her finger traced the entry routes of Caveel over and over into the red velvet placemat until it was properly indented into the fabric like a desire path in a field of wheat.

She sank into the fury of their failure, but Willem's prediction inspired the slightest bit of levity to her chest. One day, years from now, Halos might stand a chance.

Queen Marium dabbed grease from the corner of her mouth and regarded her son sweetly, "Eden, if you would go find your room."Eden, who hadn't said a word the entire meal but had been paying rapt attention, bolted upright as lightning struck him. "I'm still eating."

"Your plate disagrees."

"With Vivian away, we're down-"

"Eden," she said, the chest of her voice filling the room enough to suffocate any mice in hiding. His neck hid into his shoulders, he bowed quick and right, then escorted himself out the Great Hall.

Before either of them could begin, Willem spoke up. "Eden was not mistaken in mentioning Vivian's absence this evening, especially considering recent events. I suggest we send directions for her to personally see to the dissemination of our recent defeat. I'd rather it come from our own mouths than theirs–" Orsin held one hand up, halting his flow of words. "I've said enough; we're tabling this conversation for the time being. More pressing news found itself at our doors earlier today." He smeared a hand down his face and placed his gaze at some center spot at the table. "Myer Vistra has sent more word that Saleketh will execute their Ascension Ceremony soon. While we can easily assume why this is, once all magic is revitalized, our forces don't stand a chance against what might come. Captain Marlo has proposed a ceasefire and Marius concurs, if only to buy time to find our groundings. Now, Saleketh doesn't know we or Enid have this information, so if we announce it soon, we might appear as less of a threat to their authority. Of course, I'm not enthusiastic about retreating with our tail between our legs, but it could promise more time to plan." Willem seemed to contemplate the idea more than Vira, who positioned herself higher on the cushion of her seat. "They're aware of our position as it is, we must remain steadfast in our decisions lest the world think of us as cowards."

"What you fail to realize, Vira-" Willem interjected, "-is that every nation is a coward in the eyes of Saleketh. Keeping our head down allows us to regroup."

“And become a mockery? My stomach boils at the mere idea.” She huffed. “We should not continue the offensive but we cannot reverse a call to rebel, no matter how small.”

“You suggest we leap head-long into the fray?”

“I suggest we wait for a response. If they choose to sequester our forces, so be it. We can rebuild with discretion.” An odd chortle echoed throughout the room and both of their faces shot towards it. Osrin stood, leaning his weight on his hands resting on the table. The sun set behind his head, casting a shadow down the length of the room, peaking between Vivian’s empty seat and Vira. “Your passion is charming, Rivira, but misplaced. I did not send Eden away for more plotting.” He turned his attention to Willem, that smug smile once again dawning his features. “Willem, will partake in his first official business as Halos’ heir and conduct well-surveilled negotiations with Saleketh. Perhaps a younger voice will dissuade them of our intentions, or at least our future intentions. Vira, you will lead an expedition to South Panatry to and spread the word: Enid was in over their heads and now needs correcting. These attacks were of their own violation and we will respect Salekath’s sovereignty and are prepared to respond in whatever way they deem fit.”

“But father, we cannot afford to lose our most trusted ally.”

“It was a frail partnership to begin with. The enemy of my enemy can only be my friend so long as they’re of use and that ‘friend’ has been jeopardized. And they’re tainted with sorcery; we must wash our hands of them immediately and indefinitely.” As if wielding an iron fist, he silenced the rebuttal Willem was readying. Vira, just as her pallet goes, takes it with a grain of salt. Osrin cannot forsake Willem for much longer, as in a few years time he will be taking the throne for himself. A fact Osrin hasn’t once mentioned in any of their presences.

Vira tsked at her meal, appetite suddenly gone. She raises. “If that is the way it must be then we have nothing further to discuss. May I be excused?” Osrin stares daggers into his son. Willem returns it, respectfully. Marium winced at the tension between them, starting a pitying look at her daughter. “You may.”

Vira bows and leaves before anyone can change their mind. Behind the large doors are a line of people seeking an audience with Osrin. Among them, Sir Sergius Marlo, Duchess Kittredge Pallorous, Lord Marius Gullweather, and a few lords and ladies she hardly recognizes, likely looking to skim off a fair amount of cream from their tax dollars. Sergius smiles at her, muttering a few quiet remarks before excusing himself from the conversation. “Your highness, if I may have a word,” he asks as he falls in line with her gait. She nods, sparing him a glance. “Brief. After tonight, I’ve once again found my stomach soured.” She makes her way to her bedchambers, but Sergius crosses ahead of her, extending an arm. “Miss. My word requires a detour,” his expression is something serious.

“What for?” He observes their wandering company and pulls her around the corner. “Enid’s blunder has sparked unrest amongst the lower ranks, going as far as our chivalry. Vivian aside, I trust that you could at least straighten out the more refined members of our legion before they become trouble.”

“A proper reprimanding doesn’t sound like a detour.”

“It’s not, I merely ask for your presence. These ideas are in their infancy– a high chin and an iron fist will ensure it won’t last a fortnight.” Vira rolls her neck around shoulders, reserving time for herself to consider. She’d planned on drawing a bath, sleeping early, and rising before the sun. Sergius awaits her answer, earnest. He rarely asked for favors after spending most of her adolescence giving orders. It was only after she turned twenty that he began considering her one

of his peers. And disorder among the knights spelt a certain kind of trouble that would only compound their current instability. “And it cannot wait until morning?” He shakes his head. “If they have the night to think it over, they’ll begin to search for cracks in our walls. It’s my recommendation that we nip it in the bud.” She finds her resolve.

“Very well,” she says, turning on her heels and embarking through the halls, out the castle, and toward the training yard.

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The circumference of the grounds are lined with a thick battlement of cobblestone and mortar, prepped with embrasures for archers along the edges. However, none were training today because foot soldiers and trainees filled the floor, slashing their sticks on straw dummies and wrestling in their underdressing. In all meanings of the words, they were passing time– merely training for the sake of routine, as expected of anyone wanting to be renowned in King Osrin’s Order of Knights. Vira and Sergius stood over them on that perch, observing their strengths and weaknesses through scolded features. The spots their feet stood would one day wear down and become indented from their shoes. “I believe Vivian has a true passion for foreign affairs, with all her traveling,” Sergius begins. Vira chuckles.

“Believe me, she does so with no interest in allyship. She keeps an eye on their development more than she engages in diplomacy. She’s insociable as far as I’m concerned.” He grimaces. She’d trained with him too, and only left his mentorship after she’d been granted free agency to travel. Vivian had been in no way expected to remain that way, but Vira sees where it burns him. If she cared less for the man, she would’ve reported his apparent distaste for a member of the royal family by now. She often wonders if it extends beyond that, but never for long. “Be that as it may, she’s found her callings. I was curious if you’d had any progress finding

yours?" Vira quirks an eyebrow. "I have no plans to quit training, if that is what you are asking. The last thing we need is a weak defense."

"Actually," he turns to face her more now, leaning an elbow against the merlon. "I plan to recommend you to be our next commander. A promotion, if His Majesty allows it." Vira hears a bell somewhere at the back of her mind, ringing loudly to its audience of nerves and scattered breaths. Sergius states at her with complete transparency. He rests a hand on her shoulder. "King Osrin cannot do battle for much longer. Vivian is spread too thin, and Willem is cordial. I've seen your progress and believe you to be the only true candidate." She stays silent, awaiting his conclusion. "However, I'd like my decision to be penultimate. I know Eden is only a few years behind and shows equal promise, but my mind is already made. This is, unless you see a future for yourself elsewhere. If that's the case, I'll trade my attention to your brothers." Vira adjusts her focus minimally. To his stubble, his graying hairs. The rivers of his wrinkles, their tributaries and confluence. He nears retirement as well. Within the decade. She sees that now. "I've treated each of my pursuits indiscriminately, Captain. Whichever shows the most promise will dictate my future. If it is your good judgment," she returns to entertainment below; a flare of drama. They've gathered together as if in gossip. Or commotion. "Then I accept." He doesn't show his pride; but she feels it diffusing from his skin, accentuated by the sunset. "It would be my-"

The group below begins yelling, one sprinting far past the yard and through the gates. A few signal for Sergius, waving their arms to and fro. They shout too, all variations of:

"Sir!"

"It's Lagarde!"

and "He's dead!" Sergius takes off to the closest tower, Vira closely behind. They descend the stairs and traverse the lawn. The crowd parts for them, revealing a still body at its

center. Sergius approaches carefully. The body belongs to Seamus Lagarde, and he is dead. His eyes have sunken into his body. His flesh has partly melted away into a state of early decay. His hair lies, white and detached from his skull on the grass beneath. If he hadn't been a witness, Sergius wouldn't have accepted that the corpse was fresh. "What happened?"

"We don't know, sir," chirped a particularly shaken woman. "We were talking and he collapsed spontaneously." Vira also took to her knees, examining the body for signs of death. Its decomposed state leaves little to be discovered. The bones weren't deformed as far as she could see. When faced with mystery, her conscience wants to blame magic. She surveys the perimeter. "Everyone be on guard for Hyanite or sorcerers. I'd wager the supernatural over the impossible." Sergius lifts his shirt and removes his pants. Their search is quick and efficient, tracing his rotten skin for a specific kind of discoloration. Likely small in size, high in saturation. Finding nothing, she flips him and they repeat. A few eyes from the surrounding soldiers triple-check after them. Vira pats her hand along his back. She confuses a few fractured bones for Hyanite, but atop the convex of his right scapula is a hard, pebble-like object. It blends into the shadows of his tattered muscle and sinew. She freezes. "Sergius," she says. He follows her fist, watching her lift and open, revealing a dull, black crystal. The color drains from his face. He stares at her hand in an ugly horror, then meets her eyes with unwilling trepidation. She faces him calmly and assuredly. "Something has happened."

"What have you done?"

"Listen," she pleads. "Trust me." He tightens his mouth shut. She flips her wrist and drops the gem. Sergius flinches, reaching forward to catch it; to somehow undo her actions. But just as quick as he processed it falling does he realize that she sits upright and breathes steadily.

“It’s dormant. The magic is ineffective,” she reasons. He furrows his eyebrows. “Is that possible?”

“No.” Vira picks the stone back up, turning it over in the waning sunlight. “It’s opaque. It might not be Hyanite.”

“If I may,” a young man speaks up, bowing his head. “He did have a shard of Hyanite. In his shoulder. ‘Got stabbed last winter and it’s been keeping him alive ever since.” They don’t acknowledge him and instead find wordless understanding. Sergius stands. “We must find the source of this. Everyone search the area for possible interference. Nicholas,” he addresses the boy, “Return to your quarters. You’ll face due punishment for harboring information of a crime. Bring anything you find directly to me.” Vira joins him, raising her chin to resume her status. If the Knights need admonishing, she is more than happy to oblige.

“Two of you will need to dispose of this body,” she orders. “Cremate it in the Northern Amphitheatre as a warning, and inform those who survive him of his ignominy.” She gives him the final word: an austere “Dismissed.”