

Oathbreaker

Invasion of the Empire's forces took Pyrinia by surprise, though not because it happened, the writing was on the wall for their aggression. The kingdom was scrambling to call their knights into service and rally their own army. Even if they could somehow muster their defense it would take a few days to weeks before it could arrive at the frontline. That window was for the Empire's troops to take control of as much of the Valtima territory as possible. Valtima was blessed with beautiful nature and bountiful soil not readily found elsewhere, fit for agriculture which made it the greatest exporter of food, namely various types of grain to the rest of the kingdom. Geographically it controlled the one and only narrow valley that spanned outwards to the rest of the kingdom creating a natural bottleneck. Control of this region was crucial as its occupation would both cripple the Kingdom's food supplies and create the necessary forward position for any future attempts of conquest.

Meanwhile after multiple troops, personnel and search parties that went missing after entering the Black forest, the Empire's forward party abandoned any further attempts of collecting lumber from it. It seemed as though the forest was truly haunted or at least treacherous as the locals claimed it to be. The lack of official announcement only further demoralized their troops. After encountering fierce retaliation from what their scouts could only describe as an organized militia formed of quote Elvish markswomen riding gray saber-tooth tigers unquote repeatedly foiled their raids on the villages. Still, despite the failures at the later stages, their operation was mostly a success for what it set out to achieve. Creating tension and destabilizing the area, building pressure on the major settlements. Their second objective of acquiring timber for siege weaponry however had lagged behind due to unforeseen circumstances. It was a minor but a significant setback for the Empire's advances. Unbeknownst to any it had bought Kingdom days worth of time. This would become the unceremonious start of the Empire's otherwise successful campaign's downfall...

Deep in the night at a rather large estate not too far from Viveria, a sole lantern's light illuminated the large bedchambers, luxuriantly decorated. For the personage that was currently residing in it however, it

was all too humble for his status. After the first news of the peril that befell his land he rode out with all his knights under to the frankly vapid city with nothing but fields all around that was Viveria. Margrave Reynold had found a strange note, hung from a near invisible string in front of his private quarters where none but his most trusted aides were allowed. Its contents were bare and to the point. Whoever it was, it wished to meet him to offer a bargain. Stipulating that they would appear before him, three hours past the last toll of the bell when he was alone in his room.¹ Normally he would crumple it up and toss it away as nonsense. It did, however, have a magical seal that contained a tremendous amount of energy, to the point that the typically undetectable magical seal had become visible to the naked eye. Atypically, he couldn't fathom the elements behind the magic seal as one usually could. When he touched the letter, he sensed the faint presence of another seal that prompted him to accept this strange invitation.

Cool and refreshing sensation, as though spring's gentle breeze had just caressed him. He would recognize this anywhere, it was his daughter's seal, the one he had thought was lost forever. He had finished his work early, just so he could count the minutes pass. In meticulous precision he waited. The note only stated that he was to be alone; however, it bore no mention of having nobody around thus his most trusted bodyguard was standing guard just outside the room with dozens more patrolling as scheduled. He was anxious, what if they couldn't enter and left. He was hoping that his retainers would bring in this mystery contact after apprehending them, but if they did catch them, they should have brought them in by now, so the first outcome was more than likely, still he waited for the last minute until the moment when the day turns. The lantern's flame flickered for a moment, and she appeared before him. Hair platinum white, its sheen shining through the dark shadows cast by the lantern's harsh lighting. Carrying a fleeting charm, it has to be her.

- "I was expecting you, you who call themselves Alicia. A foreign noble of obscure origins."

'Wow, now that's a first. When the hell did I become part of some aristocracy?' Low and deep voice sounded filled with confidence there was no mistaking it. Another form of unease set in now. He heard no footsteps, felt no magic and he hadn't left the room since the morning, ruling out the possibility that

¹ First bell rings at 6 AM signifying morning and start of the day. Bells will ring once every 3 hours until 9PM where it will ring last time. Only in some cities and capitals will the bell ring every hour.

they had been waiting inside all along, and even if they had been in all this time, no one could stay concealed for that long without raising some suspicion in this small room. Only two other options came to his mind, this person was a masterful assassin, one that could take heads of monarchs or one of the few fabled sorcerers who had pried open the secrets of teleportation. Regardless of which, one thing was for certain, they were someone from a far different league and just as dangerous.

- "I do not think we've formally met."
- "True, but I learned a great deal about you. Your exploits, your power. Before any talks are to be had, I must be certain of *who* you are. I may not know what you are, but I do know what you are not - a human."
- "Would me being inhuman change your opinion?"
- "In sooth it matters to me little. Still, in light of recent treason committed against my house I am especially wary of those who claim to be an admirer. So speak carefully. Who are you, an ally or an enemy?"
- "Neither, but I can be both, depending on the circumstance."

Tension was high in the room.

- "...I shall hear what you have to say, for now."
- "I am here to make an offer that will annul your due debts to me, you know, for taking in and caring for your daughter..."

Though he loathed his own daughter's well-being being used as a damn bargaining chip, he could not do anything about it, at least not right now.

- "...and I might just be able to assist you get out of the bind you've found yourself in."

'Why have you chosen to make this offer to me, specifically?' he wanted to ask, but he already had his answer. She might become an ally or an enemy... That is, if the negotiations here fall apart, she will side with the Empire. Another opponent is the last thing the Kingdom needs right now. Most significantly, his daughter's life would be endangered. This woman had already demonstrated her willingness to use her as a tool by bringing it up to him. There was no doubt she would be sold to the rats of the Empire if he failed here now. He played out all the action he could take in his mind, none of them led to a satisfactory outcome. Bitterly, Reynold could only concede, it was a checkmate from the beginning, and she knew it.

- "Before we continue, let me hear it, your price."

- "Oh, I'm afraid it's not as tangible as you imagine... Big sack of gold is not something that I'm after. No, it's something quite simple really. Pledge, a promise if you will."

Various scenarios raced through his head; naturally, under the tense atmosphere, they weren't the least bit comforting.

- "I haven't even told you the full details and you're already this stiff,

「Whispers」

Relax, you will find my request quite agreeable."

With just those words, as though some invisible knot came loose, his body eased up, his racing mind came to a calm lull.

- "I see that in the future it is inevitable that we will have to interact with other parties, the world is a big place and I believe that it will feel a little less hostile if we had a dependable ally with us."
- "And you seek an alliance from the kingdom, is that it? That... is beyond my power."
- "I am aware, but I do not need the endorsement from the entirety of Pyrinia, just your will be a good start, what do you say?"

She held out her hand.

- "That is much more reasonable... I accept, though committing our agreement in writing will take some time."
- "No worries, it can take its time.
With that, my work here is done. Before I leave, do you fear spiders?"
- "And what does this have to do with our talks?"
- "Everything."

As soon as she said that her outstretched hand's sleeve slowly emerged a spider small enough to be held by one's finger. It abseiled down onto his desk.

- "Now usually they prefer to stay inside one's hair or hide inside some other parts of your clothes, you won't even notice that they're there, but if that's too unnerving for you, you can keep them in a sturdy box and keep it inside your pockets; don't worry about feeding them, they manage on their own."
- "This is...?"
- "A familiar of mine, one that will allow you to speak directly with me. Just speak to it, as you would to me."
- "So you're a witch..."

He put his finger on his desk in front of the creature, and it gently crawled along his finger and vanished into his clothing. So ephemeral was critter that he questioned whether it was a real being or figment of his imagination.

- "Something more than that."

「 Therianthropy 」

Wiry appendages similar to very same spider's grew out from behind her, startling him for a moment. He wanted to call her something, anything, but couldn't think of anything that would describe her without upsetting the recipient.

- "Araneae hybrid. That's what I am, who we are. This image is but a halfway point between our true form. I believe you would have found that too overwhelming to bear all of a sudden."
- "Does that mean...!"
- "Oh dear, you're meeting a lady for the first time and already you want to see her abdomen? I thought you a married man."
- "That...- No, enough. Why have you revealed yourself to me?"

The limbs retracted and disappeared behind her quickly as they appeared.

- "Trust is not built upon deception. I hoped that it would convey my sincerity."

Reynold reclined against his chair in deep thought before long he muttered something to himself.

- "A word once given... I won't go back on it now."
- "That is great to hear."
- "But back to your end, how exactly will you help us?"
- "Before anything I must tell you that we're not fighting in this coming conflict for you, but I can make the invaders' lives miserable. When the time is opportune I will tell you, but for starters, in three days time, go to the largest marketplace in Viveria on the ringing of the third bell; seek out a wealthy merchant following a small girl. Tell her 'The finch has come.' They will provide you with the extra rations needed for your troops, for a pittance."
- "How did you-"
- "Surely you didn't think me a fool that acts blindly? One more thing, here; from Rosalia."

She slid a folded letter over his desk in front of him. In great elation he picked it up and skimmed over it, the chirography, the word choice, even the mistakes were the features .

‘Now, what was the local expression again... something with ways and paths... eh, later.’

Well with that, I must bid thee adieu.”

- “Wai-”

Before he could say anything, he was yelling out to an empty room, all alone. She had vanished as fast as she had appeared. In his haste to sally forth to Viveria the knights he took with him were ill-prepared in terms of rations, this wouldn’t be an issue had the bailiffs in charge of the city hadn’t been bumbling morons that mismanaged the food supply. As it were, it was a choice between either having starving soldiers or starving citizens neither of which was good. It was a significant impediment, and she had possibly provided him with a solution. Besides that, she had brought news from his daughter, a simple gesture that gave him hope and ardor to persevere through this predicament. For at least that he wished to thank her. Then he realized something, that critter he was entrusted with. As he rifled his pockets and clothes it somehow appeared on the back of his hands. *‘Elusive, just like their master...’* A thought went through his mind. Into it he whispered from the root of his heart:

- “...Gramercy.”

Days went by in a flash and the Empire’s invasion forces had made significant progress towards Viveria. Having Alpha check up on Gamma’s excavation of the pitfall, Charlie’s handling of stockpiles and the correspondents within Viveria, Echo’s interception of the Empire’s forward force, stockpiling of Paxton’s potions, Delta’s round the clock surveillance, Alice’s patrol that caught any that approached too closely to the heart of Velauhart, Llynbel’s pulling and drying of river streams pooling them for a cascade and much much more behind the scenes. Week worth of preparation was in place, whether it was enough or not, mattered little to Alicia. Regardless of the outcome it wouldn’t be a great loss on her end.

Few days prior she visited the acquaintance who forged her blade before for an order, a plain ring. It was an unusual request, for someone of Alicia’s status to have interest in such a mundane object. Even though he insisted that he make it into something extravagant by using different more

luxurious metals than plain iron or adding in engravings or socketing jewels, it was still turned down. It was an uninspired silvery ring that would have fit snugly into her fingers if she bothered to wear it. It was something symbolic of her past.

As planned the Empire's forces were successfully steered towards the drying little stream outside that was fed by one of Llynbel's rivers. She had faith in her temporary Embankments that would divert the torrential flow of water that would soon sweep away the invaders. They only had to work once after all, so she could cut significant corners in their durability to make time. Unfortunately the Empire's army did not establish a permanent base as she had hoped, instead only a portion of them were stopping to rest and resupply there for a moment. Still that was more than enough. As she gave the go ahead to Llynbel. Thunderously the northern mountains of Velauhart spouted massive amounts of water, held back by Llynbel. Just in case of premature failure of the embankments, she had all of the potentially at risk areas restricted and vacated leaving many housings at risk of destruction; but for her, buildings could be rebuilt, lives could not.

'I commit to keeping completely, to the full extent of my capacities and judgment, the following promises:'

Standing on a bluff above the source of the flowing water, where she could easily watch how the freshet ran, she flung the ring she was clutching in her pocket into the raging stream.

'I shall use my knowledge for the benefit of mankind.'

When she finished her engineering school she had to take an oath and a cheap silvery ring symbolized that oath.

'I shall bear the entire responsibility for my actions and shall in no way discharge them on another.'

It was in a sense exonerating herself of her former values.

'I shall endeavor to perfect my professional abilities'

She found herself a new life, a new identity and a new people that now depended on her.

'I shall remain wary of the context and consequences of projects I take upon...

...I shall give particular attention to projects with military applications.'

Her former principles were inapplicable, but she still wished to preserve it, until now.

'I shall not use my knowledge for destructive purposes.'

Every line of the Oath she took replayed in her mind, fresh as if it was just yesterday.

'I shall practise my profession in complete intellectual honesty, with conscience and dignity.'

The people now she looked after did not need a Civil Engineer; they needed a leader, someone who could provide them protection, a place to live and lead them to prosperity. Time might come when they need an Engineer as it was historically, the architect and maker of war-engines. In doing so she would break her oath. In breaking one oath, she made another. One that she gave to herself, that she would protect those whom she cared for, even if she had to drag her standards and morality through the mud and filth to uphold it.

- "I solemnly take this oath, freely and on my honor."
Here began the founding of Velauhart...