

Name: Basalt

Name origin: Basalt is a dark-colored, fine grained, igneous rock

Nickname(s): Bazzy, Bazzil

Age: 16 years (at death)

Rank: General

Species: Gryphus

Species Combination: African Crowned Eagle; Sundevall's Side-Striped Jackal

Kingdom: Northern

Sex: AFAB

Gender: Hen

Pronouns: She/Her

Sexuality: Asexual Panromantic

Permissions:

Can be used anywhere that reasonably makes sense! Obviously was general to many Northern soldiers, and killed many Plains and Rainforest soldiers. Rarely left the Northern Kingdom aside from political business, and even then was accompanied by guards. If you'd like to have a character who knew her personally feel free to @Uh-oh#0650 in the discord!

Remember that she died in **March of 2023** during the siege of Barhaan and should not be depicted alive after that!!

Purchased Traits: Scars on face, Melanism

Appearance: Like a starless night streaked with blood, Basalt's appearance inspires fear in her enemies and anxious respect in her peers. Her height aside, one cannot deny just how fit the General is. Years of constant training and diligent practice has honed her body into an efficient vessel for brutality. Her glossy indigo-black pelt does little to hide the cords of wiry muscle underneath. Under the cover of night, she is nearly impossible to detect. The only color to break the monotony of her dark visage are the red markings on her shoulders and face, and her piercing, magma-hued eyes. Interestingly enough, she has only sustained two significant scars for over a decade of fighting: a deep nick on her right ear and two slashes just above her beak.

While not blessed with the dextrous hands of the Rainforest harpies, Basalt does possess semi-opposable "thumbs" where dew claws would otherwise be. All four of them are tipped with wicked talons that have seen their fair share of blood-spilling,

thus, they are highly maintained by Basalt. Her wings, large and imposing for her size, are equally looked after. Preened to perfection, they are ready for flight at their owner's whim.

Size class: Small

Weight class: Standard



Personality:

Positive:

Driven

Trying to stop Basalt from achieving her goals is very much like trying to stop a hurtling boulder with one's words: impossible. Whether through brute force or conniving schemes, she would sooner face failure than admit surrender. She will commit every ounce of her being to getting what she wants and years of practice has made her more efficient than ever.

Intelligent

One does not become a leader of soldiers without having the brain to handle it. Basalt's intellect is unquestionable in the war room and in the battlefield. She applies all that she learns almost seamlessly, even under immense pressure, and executes them with the grace of a master. She may not be the smartest in the kingdom but her ability to use whatever she knows to its limits is nothing short of remarkable.

Scrupulous

Whatever Basalt does always hides multiple layers of steps and carefully pre-planned precautions. She is meticulous, keenly taking note of as many details while surveying the general concept of her thoughts and plans. When a plan fails, she is already executing one of many back-up plans. Such hyper-diligence has led her to butting heads with some of her less-capable peers but one cannot deny the efficacy of her plans.

Neutral

Manipulative

While Basalt may not be the easiest gryphus to get along with, she possesses a surprising amount of charisma and dry humor to keep her in the good graces of those she wishes to use. The hen prefers to use subtle tactics (charm, friendliness, self-disclosure, guilt), when possible, to mask her true intentions and provide a basis for plausible denial if she is caught. Her manipulation is rarely ever intentionally malicious. It is a means to an end, in many cases, the avoidance of unnecessary confrontation.

Stern

Basalt knows better than to bring up work when it is time for rest. There is a time and place for everything. She therefore fully expects everyone she works with to get their priorities right and not to slack off when she needs their cooperation. She will not hesitate to reprimand or punish those beneath her should they step out of line or act inappropriately. When she speaks, they must listen, when she gives a command, they must obey. Questions are asked if she allows them. Any deviation from this is a personal slight to her.

Strategic

It is doubtless that Basalt has the skills and mindset to come up with plans and strategies nearly on the fly - or to last several years. For the most part, they achieve the goal she sets forth. On the downside, the “casualties” of her plans - usually the loss of life for soldiers and civilians alike - has made some in her rank question her morality and compassion. She is “too detached”, some accuse, rational to the point of abandoning morality altogether at times.

Negative

Opportunistic

Without a single shred of doubt, Basalt will use anything and anyone to get ahead and what she wants. There are very few things that the ambitious gryphus won't do. Sabotage and blackmail are like bread and butter to her, and using someone's weakness to her advantage is child's play. Let it be known that if she deems you worthy enough to give her time, she has likewise found some dirt to use against you should you ever betray her. Give her an inch and she'll claim a hundred miles.

Pitiless

Though usually reserved for enemies of the kingdom, Basalt's cruelty is nonetheless infamous among her peers. Enemies who go up against her on the battlefield die horribly and slowly - those who survive are often horribly crippled. Her tactics tow the line of being simply atrocious while obeying wartime laws. If she can find a loophole to exploit, she will grab onto it with a vice grip. Whether it is fighting on the battlefield or debating against politicians that don't agree with her, Basalt rarely gives mercy without a steep price to pay.

Rigid

It seems contradictory to be rigid when Basalt can so easily adapt to her environment and change plans when the situation calls for it. However, the rigidity that Basalt has refers more to her absolute rejection of any morals or principles that aren't her own. She may, at best, acknowledge that an opinion is different from hers

but she will always, *always* believe them to be inferior to her own. Her stubbornness on this has led to actual losses – on the battlefield and in her personal life. She may defer to the words of her ruler and those above her in rank out of sheer respect and logical decorum but she will not accept any change in her view of the world without the most scrutinizing analysis. Even that may not work in the end.

Stats:

Empathy: 1/10 Intelligence: 9/10
Humor: 2/10 Strength: 8/10
Patience: 2/10 Stamina: 6/10
Agility: 8/10 Sensitivity (emotional): 1/10
Sociability: 3/10 Sensitivity (physical): 2/10
Loyalty: 8/10 Pain tolerance: 8/10
Bravery: 3/10 Paranoia: 9/10

Likes:

People: Loyal, Strong, Unquestioning

Food: Sweets

Activities: Making and playing board/card games

Other: Landscape sketching

Dislikes:

People: Weak, Stubborn, those that are happier than her

Food: Bitter, chocolate

Activities: Anything that involves letting her guard down or goofing off

Other: Nepotism

Trivia:

- Basalt's sabotage of her brother has remained a secret that only she is privy to.
- At one point in her military career, she sent a couple talented soldiers to their deaths under the guise of a mission she knew they'd fail.
- Though she was never in love with Aedes, Basalt unconsciously viewed the former soldier as a friend before the betrayal.
- Basalt treats the games she makes like treasures. To be gifted a set of Daan cards or dies she has carved herself is as close to an "I like you/I value you as an individual" as an avus will get.

Playlist:

TBA

Family:

Mother - Cirrus

Father- Buteo

Siblings - Gneiss, Phyllite, Skarn, Woodstar, Hillstar, Nimbus, Cumulus, Stratus, etc..

Backstory

Credit to Amnewrie for writing this beautiful bio!!

-Nestling-

Born in and for the Storm

The story of Basalt's hatching is a story near and dear to her heart, to the point where the proud gryphus believes that she had been destined for greatness from the very beginning.

It begins a week prior to her clutch's appointed hatch day. The weather had been gloomy and thunderous all through the month but that particular week had been ravaged by an endless downpour. Rain fell down so hard that any fool caught under it felt as though they were being pelted by hundreds upon thousands of sharp stones. The wind howled like a beast, ripping trees up from their roots and stripping branches bare. The sky, most of all, was the color of the void, black and unending, with only snakes of deadly lightning visible in its gloom.

The gryphus of the Northern Kingdom were unaccustomed to such a ferocious natural event. Casualties would later be reported throughout the following weeks in the wake of the storm, with mothers weeping at the sight of their precious eggs crushed under the caved-in roofs of their homes. Only the richer, more affluent families weathered such a disaster in relative peace. Their homes of carved stone and thickly woven vines held fast against the deluge. Basalt's kin had been one such privileged family. Old and renowned for creating generations

of mighty soldiers, her kin owned a piece of land that was a most enviable abode to reside in. What was once a humble hut decades ago was now a splendid estate carved into a plateaued mountain overlooking a vast forest. Spacious rooms ornamented with battle trophies and luxurious fur rugs, littered with all manner of opulent paraphernalia, altogether warmed by a roaring central fireplace, made its residents want for nothing.

Not even the monarchs themselves would complain living in such a haven, many wagered.

Alas, despite the stronghold of a house her family had, Basalt's clutch had been unfortunate enough to have been laid in a branch house, situated in a less sturdy, utilitarian hut within a deciduous wood. It was closer to the capital, and so her parents often resided in it when they were actively on duty. Her mother had deemed it safe enough to hatch her third brood there but who could ever predict a storm as destructive as this?

When Basalt's tiny, shivering head broke free from the sheltered warmth of her egg, she was met with the roar of thunder and the bellowing of winds. A wall - non-weight bearing - had collapsed, and chilling rain splattered into the nursery, seeping into the nest she and her clutchmates were in. She had apparently been the last to hatch, and so she did not shiver as much as her older siblings. They were all peeping and shrieking from the cold.

A gryphus - their nursemaid - had pushed her way into the room despite some wall blocking the doorway to it. The poor thing quickly began scooping the chicks one after another into a waiting, warm basket. Ah, but Basalt was curious. Basalt was brave. Basalt..... Severely lacked a survival sense. For instead of blindly clambering to the scent of warmth and feathery down, she crawled towards the roars of the storm. She peeped defiantly at it, almost angered that it had dared ruin such a momentous thing as her birth. And though she was thoroughly doused for her efforts, the little sack of meat and bones continued shrieking at the thunder and lightning, up until her nursemaid finally scooped her up with a fearful squawk and deposited her dripping self into the basket with her siblings.

While they began to cry for mother, Basalt continued shrieking threats to the rude natural disaster.

One of her clutchmates didn't last an hour after being so heavily soaked in chilling water, passing away in a fit of weak coughs and mournful squeaks. Basalt, too, fell ill from the cold. It was said her fever ran as hot as the summer sun for several days and yet, through it all, the blind little fuzzball struggled. Her nursemaid would recount watching her wriggle around beneath the layers of blankets, peeping angrily whenever she sneezed - as if the very idea of being killed by a cold was an insult to her.

Thankfully, miraculously, the fever finally subsided. Basalt, weakened yet victorious, fell into her first true slumber. Her defiant chirps were replaced with soft snoring and her dreams were no longer haunted by the sounds of the storm.

She had conquered her first foe.

The first of many victories, truly.

- Fledgling -

When Everyone Else is Excellent....

On one hand, Basalt was proud to be part of such a prestigious, talented family. Generations of accomplished soldiers, leaders, and politicians all came from her bloodline. It was to a point where it was only natural to expect the best from the progeny of her kin. On the other hand, such a familial reputation came with back-breaking expectations and an upbringing almost bordering on the sadistic.

"True excellence is natural talent honed to perfection," was the first lesson she and her siblings were taught when their education began. Like most children in her family, Basalt and her five clutch mates were homeschooled. Only the finest tutors - or her parents themselves, when they were free - would help refine whatever raw talent that she and her kin had. Basalt was determined to live up to her family's reputation, voraciously digesting every bit of information thrown at her.

Her siblings, too, tackled their lessons with similar fervor. Gneiss, her oldest and biggest clutch-brother, quickly became the best among them. He seemed to lack nothing and excelled at everything. Where Basalt would earn full marks on a

test, Gneiss would earn full marks *and* finish said test sooner. If Basalt set a clutch record for the fastest lap around their room, Gneiss would then proceed to beat it.

And it wasn't just Gneiss.

All her siblings would improve whatever she achieved, and she'd retaliate by beating their improvements too. It was a vicious sort of cycle, a festering, cut-throat competitiveness that their parents practically egged on and verbally encouraged. To say that Basalt's childhood was boiled down to a contest on who was the superior sibling would be terribly accurate. Sometimes, her older siblings from previous clutches (*her parents had had two before hers*) visited to spectate the whole ordeal. It was common for them to place bets amongst themselves as to who would do better at what and so on.

Much to her chagrin, Basalt was rarely the one they backed.

...The Mediocre Stick Out

The transition from "preparatory classes" to "true lessons" was abrupt. One day Basalt and her siblings were arguing over who knew the historical achievements of their family, and the next, they were being drilled by tutors on the extensive history of the Northern Kingdom. Their races around their large nursery became exhaustive laps around their estate's large track and field. Basalt had never felt so small when she first set foot with her siblings upon the training grounds. The clutch before her - and even a few gryphus from clutches prior to that - made diligent use of the facility.

A few older siblings were racing each other across the track; another pair was sparring with each other in the air. All of them were absorbed in their training. Their similar pelts of dusty sand and browns were a testament - proof - of their relation to the accomplished gryphus that were their parents. In contrast, Basalt's own pelt of dark indigo black made her stick out like a bent talon. It always made her feel like she wasn't a part of such an amazing family, that she wasn't good enough to have their colors.

It was a source of ridicule for Gneiss to attack her for, often telling her: “You’re like a cuckoo hatched among eagles.”

Basalt was determined to prove her boar of a brother wrong. She *was* an eagle, and she’d be the one on top by the end of their education. It was an uphill climb from that point though. While her siblings grew larger and stronger with every passing day, Basalt struggled to build up the stamina needed to stay on par with them. She was almost always the last in races, most likely to lose in a wrestling match. Though she was nimble in flying exercises, she could not last as long as the others. Had she belonged to any other family, Basalt would have been praised for being so good at flying at such a young age, showered with parental adulation for her achievements on the sparring field.

By her family’s impossible standards, however, she was merely above mediocre.

And to them, mediocre was synonymous with “failure.”

Her only saving grace amidst her string of embarrassing losses was the fact that, with age, she proved to be the most intellectual among her clutch. Even Gneiss could no longer stand on even footing with her when it came to scholarly activities. Basalt guarded her coveted spot at the top of written examinations with a fury, wearing down pages of bound text in her endless sessions of review and re-analysis. Even though the topic still confused her in certain points, Basalt even took to reading political treatises and socio-economic studies. Parchments on war and military strategy quickly integrated into her self-study.

In a way, the words in the writings soothed her, comforted her in their knowledge. They offered her power through their wisdom, unquestioning and uncaring of her accomplishments or status. Though they often used a complicated vocabulary that required a thesaurus to understand, her efforts were always, always rewarded. So it came to be that after a long and weary day of mediocre results on the field, Basalt would flee to the relative sanctuary of her family’s record room. She’d lament her failures to the pages of the newly-encoded treaties, took solace in the paragraphs on carved tablets (*yet to be transitioned to paper*) that spoke of battles being won with contrition and not just brawn.

And then Basalt came to experience her first taste of utter defeat.

It was a memory that would leave a bitter taste in her mouth for months after the fact.

What is A Sibling but Yet Another Enemy?

Her parents had found time in their busy schedules to arrange a triathlon of sorts for her and her clutch. Siblings from previous clutches had also come to spectate this event, their keen eyes wearily, expectantly appraising all of them from their seats in the stands. “Today we shall see the fruits of your labor of the past year,” her mother spoke, voice as clear as a bell’s yet as booming as thunder. “Should your efforts yield exceptional results, you will be removed from the nursery and given your own room here in our home. Should you fail,” Basalt saw how the faintest grimace shuddered her mother’s serene expression. “you will be transferred to a branch house for remedial lessons for a month, deprived of the right to live here for said time.”

All the siblings - from her clutch and the others - shuddered at the implications such a punishment entailed. It would be a permanent stain on their record, a blemish that would haunt them, a point of life-long ridicule by their kin. Basalt noticed a couple older siblings take on an ashen pallor by the mere mention of it, while those beside them shot snide sneers their way.

Ah. So there were a few failures.

Basalt didn’t know whether that knowledge comforted her or disgusted her.

The course began from the track, followed by a glide down the mountainside. An obstacle course through the forest would lead them to climb up the mountain before one last dash to the finish line. For a bunch of fledglings that were capable of basic flight in temperate conditions, the glide down the mountainside - which was known to be buffeted by strong gales coming from the forest below - would be a most dangerous challenge.

Basalt took her place in her lane, right beside Gneiss. Her brother sneered at her. “Mind the drop, Cuckoo,” he said. “Wouldn’t want you staining the mountain

with your blood.” Had she not been under the watchful eyes of her family, Basalt would have sliced the smile right off her brother’s arrogant beak. “I hope your big head won’t weigh you down either, brother,” was what she managed to say instead.

Her father gave the signalling screech and off they went-

- Or at least *she* would have, had Gneiss not tripped her with a swipe of his legs. Basalt stumbled into the dirt with a screech. The laughter from the stands had her burning from shame. She dared not look at her parents now. She could already picture the look of disappointment in their eyes. How could she fall for such a basic trick? She scrambled up to her paws and rushed to catch up with her siblings.

Basalt was obviously the last one to leap off the mountainside, frantic to make up for the lost distance, and almost blanked out when she was met with the sheer drop to the ground below. They were up so high. Before this, she had only managed to glide and flutter a dozen feet from the grassy floor of the track. Now, she was faced with hundreds of feet between her and the ground. She fell gracelessly for a few seconds before she came back to her senses and tucked into a dive.

She passed a few siblings on her descent and a swell of hope flickered in her chest. There was still a chance for her! She landed on a branch with a great deal of shuddering, almost slipping from the inertia of her speed. She could spy Gneiss nimbly hopping from the branches up ahead. Basalt clicked her beak angrily and went after him.

She’d show him. She’d show him that she could beat him even with all the muscle he had over her.

She’d laugh in his face when she came in first.

When they neared the end of the forest part of the challenge, Basalt made a big leap and landed right on Gneiss’s back. Her brother screamed in furious shock. He tried to shake her off but she hooked her talons into the feathers of his wings. “Thanks for the boost up,” she hissed at him before jumping onto a ledge on the mountain wall. She watched, snidely, as her brother fell off his perch and landed several feet onto a lower branch.

She got to work scaling up the mountain. It was a steep climb; there was little else to hold onto than the jutting rocks and smaller ledges. Some ledges were marked with paint to “aid” the ascent but otherwise, it was left entirely up to them to find a way back to the top. Basalt hefted herself up as fast as she could. Her wings flapped to keep her balance or to propel her forward. Meter by painful meter, she drew close to the top. “Almost there!” Her breath had become laborious; she was reaching her limit. No matter what sort of training she did, she was always going to tire out sooner than the rest. Time was against her. She had to finish quick! She had to—

Wham!

Basalt felt her vision blur as pain exploded in the back of her head. She’d been hit! By what and by whom, she wasn’t sure, but her grip on the mountain slackened, and she fell. Her wings unfurled to try and slow her fall, but in her haste, she slammed them against a lower ledge and her left wing went dangerously limp with a crack. She cried in agony as she dug her claws into the dirt and rock to skid a halt several meters down from her previous spot.

Despite the pain and clouded vision, her eyes could still make out a figure quickly advancing past her. She recognized that disgusting smirk anywhere. Her blood boiled in terrifying wrath. “Gneiss!” she screamed, her voice almost echoing off the walls. She tucked her injured wings in and shakily climbed up with renewed vigor. Her previous fatigue was replaced with anger and adrenaline.

As she clawed her way to catch up to her older brother, Basalt harshly kicked down another sibling that tried to overtake her. She ignored their pained screeches. She didn’t care about them. They didn’t matter. *They* were the mediocre ones, not her. She would be the superior child! She’d be the one her parents showered with adulation!

When she finally reached the top on shuddering limbs, Gneiss was already halfway to the finish line. Basalt heaved loud, panting breaths, a scowl on her face. She took off after him in a mad sprint. Her form and stride were perfectly to the standards of what she was taught; she pushed herself to the limit of her capabilities. She covered one meter, then two, then five. The finish line was so close! Gneiss was so close! She made a giant leap again and finally caught up to her brother.

The cheering and shouts from her older siblings - all other sounds, really - were muted to her at that moment. All Basalt heard was the thundering of her heart. All her eyes saw was the finish line. She outstretched her limbs as she prepared one final push. Then Gneiss surged forward. He looked her dead in the eye. He didn't even look half as haggard as she was. She ingrained the arrogant smirk on his detestable face to her very being. She would never forget what he'd done to her.

Her brother effortlessly charged forward, claiming the victory and rubbing her loss in her face all in one move.

Basalt didn't even care that she tumbled to the ground in an inelegant mess of tussled feathers and fur. She ignored the gasps from her older siblings. She barely even registered the concerned voices of her parents as they came to her side. Receiving their undivided attention felt so alien to her. She'd always thought she'd relish in it, bathe in it like she did the gentle rays of the dawn sun after a particularly cold night.

But their looks of pity did nothing but make her feel worse.

They weren't worried for her as a daughter, she thought. They were worried that an asset had been damaged. She'd know. She had seen the same look in their eyes when they were inspecting new armor or weapons. "Have you sprained anything? How are your wings?" came the dulcet tones of her father. She weakly stretched her left out, cringing as a lance of pain jolted up to her spine. "I fell while climbing the mountain. Gneiss threw a rock at me." Her father clicked his tongue at her. "I've told you to always be weary of surprise attacks," he said gently, almost patronisingly.

"You had a rough start and you could have finished a lot smoother," her mother added.

"But you've finished second despite it all. I suppose you've passed." Her father gave her a mild nod before stepping away to let a medi-gryphus give her a thorough lookover. She watched numbly as her parents walked over to Gneiss. The smiles they showed him.... *That* was the look and attention she wanted. As she was escorted back inside with the aid of the medi-gryphus, she shot her brother a

venomous glare. He stared back fearlessly and flaunted the little medallion their parents bestowed on him.

She would later find out that one of her siblings had failed their parents' evaluation and had been promptly shipped off to a southern branch house. She sniffed disdainfully. *How embarrassing.* She couldn't sympathize with them even if she tried. A failure was a failure. Even her own "victory" had been pyrrhic, at best. She hadn't gotten first place, she'd finished in a most unbecoming fashion, and to top it all off, she'd badly sprained her wing and twisted a paw.

Not even the opulent new room she'd been assigned in could wash away the bitterness on her tongue. It was a hollow victory. She didn't like it, hated that she could sit there and pick out the countless errors she had made during the triathlon. When she mulled over it, it all boiled down to a loose grip on her emotions. They had been the real stone that dragged her down. Gneiss may have awoken them in her, but she was the one that allowed them to fester.

Never again, she thought.

She'd been exempted from exercises for a few weeks, which meant she couldn't even improve her flying or fighting skills. Limping away from her nest, she settled before her study and brought out some parchment to jot down all she had done wrong that day. Her words were as scathing as any professional critic and she was merciless to her faults. She spent the remainder of her forced recuperation in utter isolation. Her only form of "company" were, as always, the tomes she surrounded herself in.

When Basalt fully recovered from her injuries, classes with Gneiss became an icy affair. She ignored his jibes and taunts, solely focused on beating him so soundly that he'd never be able to lift his head toward her ever again.

When she went on to dominate all the written tests some days later, Basalt finally felt a little bit better from her loss.

Alliances are for the Benefit of all Parties

Graduating from her family's educational curriculum had been a solemn affair. They were each given a ribbon inlaid with a jewel to mark the occasion, to the audience of the entire family. Much to her brother's chagrin, she and Gneiss shared the top spot among their clutch. He still dominated the battlefield and won many a game of strategic warfare against her but she likewise crushed him in every other pursuit they were taught - she even bested him in flying despite her less than stellar stamina. It was only by being truly exceptional in everything else that her parents turned a blind eye to her otherwise mundane performance in the battlefield.

"You would make for a good politician," her father told her later on as the family held a small banquet in honor of the occasion. In his claw he gripped a sparkling goblet of what could only be premium grape wine. "I have a few connections to the Royal Court. I'll see to finding someone you can shadow as an apprentice." Emboldened by the fact he'd even looked her way, Basalt dared to say: "Can't I be your apprentice, father?"

Her father raised a brow, and then chuckled, though it was as empty as his expectations of her. "I'm much too busy with important matters to take someone under my wing. And even if I wasn't, what do you have to offer that would make me want to take you?" The question rendered her speechless - a first in her life. Her brain raced to find some argument, some form of proof she could bring forth to justify being her father's protege. Yet, in the end, she found she didn't have anything truly impressive to entice the older gryphus.

Seemingly expecting her lack of reply, her father patted her on the shoulder. "Daughter, do not ask for something if you don't deserve it. I advise you to remember that." He dismissed her with a wave and walked off to converse with her uncles - all of whom were senior members of respected legal firms in the capital. Basalt wilted slightly and combed her feathers back as they stiffened from the pathetic exchange with her patriarch.

"Had an unproductive talk with our father, Basalt?" a voice called out to her.

Basalt went rigid as she turned to face a gryphus of a dark brown, striped pelt with eyes strikingly similar to hers. "Nimbus," she greeted with a polite bow, as was only customary when one spoke to the family heir. Oldest of all her siblings and

arguably the most accomplished in his generation, Nimbus was not only an ace soldier but famous for being the youngest to write a thesis on military strategy that was actually implemented in the army. He also had more confirmed kills and medals than half of all his fellow soldier siblings combined. He had since retired from active service in favor of preparing to take over the household as future patriarch but he was no less respected among the soldiers he served with.

It was no wonder his position as heir was uncontested in the family.

Said heir greeted her with a charming smile. Unlike their father, Nimbus had an air about him that made one want to let their guard down. His charisma was unsettling in its potency. Basalt had almost smiled back like a child half her age. Such nonjudgmental attention was something she was unfamiliar with and therefore, she had little in ways of defending against it.

“Father was discussing my career path. He thought I’d be suitable for politics. I’ll probably work my way up to a council member from there,” she finally answered.

Nimbus chuckled. His laughter was light and warm; it made her chest hum with an alien emotion. “I suppose he thinks you are too frail to try for the military route, eh? I’ve heard about your performance in the classes.”

The crest of feathers on her head quivered in frustration. “Father knows what’s best for me. I doubt I’d do well on any other track anyway.”

“Are you sure about that though?” Nimbus countered with a subtle raise of his brow.

He motioned to her with a wave of his wing and walked away from the noise of the banquet. Basalt hesitated only for a moment before following him. He led her down the winding hallways of their grand home, past countless rooms and numerous staff, until they arrived at a room she was all too familiar with: the Portrait Room. Arguably the most sacred space in the entire estate, the large room housed the portrait of every member of their family.

Nimbus led them inside and Basalt took the time to take in the grand paintings that hung on the walls. Generations of kin stared back at her unblinkingly, their painted gazes similarly severe and posture typically rigid, as was tradition in the kingdom. The fact that no portrait was uniform in size was a conscious choice.

It indicated one's achievements in life. The bigger the portrait, the more one had achieved. The smallest portraits were about the size of the actual gryphus' head, but they were few and far between. The most common sizes were thrice as big as the smallest ones, and upon their frames were the names of the individuals engraved in gold.

The biggest of all these portraits had been the founder of the family, the gryphus who had been gifted the land they now lived in as thanks to his achievements as a general many, many years ago. The Great Igneous' imposing visage looked down upon them both from his position right in the center of the back wall. Nimbus brought them to rest right before it. "At this time in our history, war is at the forefront of our kingdom's mind. Whatever political achievement you'll achieve along the path our father has planned for you will be shadowed by any soldier's accomplishments. Igneous was an accomplished scholar in his youth but he only really rose to fame after he joined the military and helped claim land from the Plains Kingdom."

Nimbus leveled a discerning look her way, "If you want to be remembered in this family, you must achieve as much as you can while you've the youth and energy to snatch it."

She felt her heart pick up at his words and she let her eyes wander to a portrait not that far from their founder's. Nimbus's portrait was arguably among the biggest in the room - quite the achievement for someone his age. She could only imagine how regal her own portrait would look like, how striking she'd be with her ebony pelt amongst the browns and creams. Then a thought occurred to her. She gave her oldest brother a calculating glare. "Why are you helping me?" she said bluntly.

Nimbus's smile only grew in little increments. "Can't a brother not support his youngest sister? Your struggle against Gneiss has been the most entertaining thing to watch for quite some time."

"I'm flattered I've provided you with some amusement," she grumbled.

Her oldest brother laughed then, loud and clear and so alienly bright. "It is nostalgic to me," he explained, wiping a tear from his eye. "I was like you too. I had a sibling that always got in my way. Always wanted to take what was rightfully mine. I was not naturally inclined to the violent arts. He had been slated for being heir

back in the day.”

Basalt looked at him, confused. “But, you’ve always been the best...” she muttered weakly.

She must have said the right thing, for Nimbus’s smile grew. “Curious, isn’t it? How no one in this family remembers my struggles or my brother now. That is the fate of those who are exemplary. They cast a shadow over those less than them.” He cocked his head ever so slightly, eyes squinting from his smile. “And what of you, little sister? Will you be the shadow of Gneiss’ light? Or will you erase his very presence from the minds of our family with the brilliance of your own luminy?”

He didn’t wait for her reply. Instead, he daintily plucked a feather from his wing and handed it to her. “I shall write a letter of recommendation for the military academy if you choose to take the soldier’s track. You’ll be able to bypass all the mundane tests they usually hold for enrollment.” Basalt’s paws lingered over the offered feather, hovering mere inches from it. Not accepting but neither rejecting. After a moment, her oldest brother retracted his paw. Nimbus directed her gaze to look at a portrait a little further down. It was among the smaller paintings on the wall. She found she could barely recall the name of the gryphus it belonged to. “Thundercry,” she muttered, more to herself than anything.

“An ironic name for a brother whose voice is never listened to now,” Nimbus cooed.

Basalt didn’t miss how sardonic her oldest brother’s smile had turned.

She wondered if she’d ever be able to look upon Gneiss’ portrait with a similar smugness.

“Why *are* you helping me though? I’m not stupid. What do you get from lending me aid?” It was an early lesson her parents had taught her, perhaps among the chief rules of life, that no gift was ever given without a string attached. Nothing came for free in life. Nothing. Despite the scowl that wrinkled her brows, her oldest brother did naught but ruffle her head feathers playfully.

“I may be heir to the family but it takes more than one individual to maintain order,” he said.

The connection clicked instantly in her head. “You need talented pawns on your side.”

“You would never be a pawn on my board, sister, but yes, I’m looking for kin by my side to help keep the family in check. I help them with the connections I have, and they’ll help keep the family powerful with the connections they have,” he nodded.

Basalt wasn’t convinced. “And you think I’ll be able to give you those connections?”

“Do you think you can’t?” Nimbus challenged coolly.

His question made her hiss. “Of course I can!” she snapped. “I’ve got the blood of greatness in me! Just like you, and mother, and father! I’m just as talented as the rest of you!” It was at this point that Basalt realized she had slipped yet again and allowed her anger to get the better of her. She bit her tongue so hard that she swore she tasted blood. *Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! You know better than to let your emotions get to you!* But it was just so hard. It wasn’t her fault that she’d been born with different colors, or that her body had been weakened during her hatching. There was nothing she could do about her size – no amount of food or exercise ever made her grow to be as big as her other siblings.

She wanted mother and father to look upon her with fondness, too! She wanted to show them that she was just as good, if not better, than her bratty, arrogant brute of a brother! A chance! That’s all she asked. All she needed was a chance to show everyone in her family what she could really do and–

Her eyes, glimmering with unshed tears, snapped up to meet Nimbus’s. His gaze was calm but blazing, like lava resting in the bowels of a volcano. They were like her eyes. For the briefest moment, she almost felt like he truly understood all the things she was struggling with. “The talented flock with the talented. And sister, I want you in my flock. I want your greatness on my side,” his voice was so warm, so, so inviting. Even though he towered over her, looked down on her just as everyone else in her family did, she strangely could not get mad at him. Perhaps it was because she understood what he was really offering her, beyond the literal opportunity to become great. He was offering her his belief.

“Will you take my feather, little Basalt?” He extended it to her once more.

This time, she didn't hesitate. Her paws carefully plucked the large primary feather from Nimbus's grip, holding it firmly in her own paw.

"I will."

- Subadult -

A Game Befitting of One's Intellect and Skill

True to Nimbus's words, Basalt was quickly accepted as a young student into the capital's military academy. Her oldest brother's reputation was truly a lofty thing. She needed only to present the letter he'd written to General Staff and poof, her name was placed into the list of new students. The preferential treatment, the assignment of a larger dorm room, it all came from being related to someone great. Nepotism aside, it really did pay to have the powerful backing you.

Her connections could only do so much for her though.

At the end of the day, she had to earn the treatment she was given. It was easy to fall into the familiar rigidity of a tight-kept schedule. Lectures during the early days led to practical exercises in the afternoon. Meal times were precisely an hour-long and rest was only given in the evening. In many ways, it was as if Basalt had never left home. In other ways, it felt as if she'd taken a step down from the standards she was used to.

Why was everyone so..... Lax?

That wasn't to say that most of her fellow students weren't serious about their training. Of course they were. It was really the manner by which they held themselves between lessons. She couldn't fathom how they could ever let themselves be so goofy and casual with each other, complaining about the load of work they were assigned and *gossiping* rudely about their instructors behind their backs.

Such must be the drivel of the mediocre, Basalt thought to herself.

While her peers were busy drinking and lazing around in their free time, Basalt remained diligent at all times. She kept herself in the company of those who understood her point of view, with gryphus from noble families who understood the weight of the blood they possessed. There was an odd sense of camaraderie between her and her fellow study mates. They weren't friends by any means, but their common goal united them, kept them from falling victim to the temptation of common sloth.

During her time in the academy, Basalt picked up on a hobby: game-making. She'd grown bored of the regular games available to her. Chess was a classic and would never go out of style but she'd been playing it since her fledgling days; battlewings¹ had practically been a requirement in her homeschooling. The newer, more pedestrian games available weren't all that mentally stimulating either. Therefore, in a stroke of genius (*read as: boredom*), Basalt took it upon herself to make a new game for her to indulge in.

She ordered a large sum of thick cards - 200, to be exact - and set to work writing military principles and dogmas upon them. From the countless ones available to her, Basalt chose the ones that she believed rang the most inalienably true, and whose starting words or sounds were similar. In the end, she settled for one hundred principles. On each of these first hundred cards, she added a little illustration that alluded to what the principle inferred. The other one hundred cards were written with only the latter half of said principles on their faces, with no illustrations.

The back of each card was painted an indigo black with the texture of feathers - a nod to herself as the game's creator. It took her several weeks to finalize this game. Twice did she throw her work to the trash and start fresh, frustrated by how simple it still felt to her. Only when she was fully satisfied did she begin playing her new game, dubbed "Daan²", in earnest. When she went home for the mid-year break, she showed her game to Nimbus.

"And how does one play your game, little sister?" His eyes bore into a card that spoke of the importance of lulling one's enemies into a false sense of security.

¹ The Avus equivalent to the board game "Battleship", where instead of ships, pieces named after military ranks are used.

² Daan (*Tagalog for "hundred"; pronounced: Dah-ahn*) is Basalt's equivalent to the Japanese card game "Hyakunin Isshu Karuta", with only a few minor changes.

Basalt pointed to two stacks of one-hundred cards. “This stack is composed of reader cards, and the other has the player cards.” She plucked one from each stack to show him the difference. “Player cards only have half the principle written on them while the reader cards have the complete version. From one hundred cards, only fifty player cards will be used in the game. The other fifty will be called ‘ghost cards’. The reader cards, however, will still use all one hundred.”

She shuffled the player cards and divided them into twenty-five, with each half facing her and Nimbus. “Players can arrange their twenty-five cards however they wish, provided that they arrange them in no more than three rows within the play mat. Players will then be given fifteen minutes to memorize the placements of the cards on both sides. After that, the game begins.”

She went on to explain how a third gryphus would read out a random reader card, and players would have to slap the corresponding “player cards” away. The first to swipe the correct card gained it. The game would continue on until no cards were left on their half of the field, and the player to achieve that first would be the winner.

“What if the correct card is in your opponent’s field and you claim it? Are you not helping them empty their field quicker?” Nimbus argued.

Basalt smiled. “Should that happen, then the winner of the card can choose one player card from their own field and send it to their opponent. It lessens their own field while maintaining the number of cards in their opponent’s.”

She then delved into the penalty system, explaining the various ways one could gain cards to their field by swiping at the wrong cards. Double penalties, and nulled faults were also brought up. The layers of her game seemed to make Nimbus’s eyes glitter bright with amusement and great interest. In theory, it was quite easy to understand. It was complex in its system but very clear in its instructions and difficult to misunderstand.

In practice, Daan made for a most mentally taxing game.

It was a delight for any gryphus that appreciated the challenge.

“A game that demands great memory, quick reflexes, and critical comprehension.... I may request a deck of my own, little Basalt.” Nimbus’s words made her chest warm from the praise. She hadn’t done it for him. She’d only wanted something challenging for herself. But the fact that her oldest brother thought her game was good enough to have his own copy... It filled her with great pride.

“How about we play a few rounds first? See if you’re good enough to own a copy of my game?” she said with a challenging sneer.

The grin Nimbus sent her was chillingly predatory. “I look forward to the deck you’ll make for me.”

After 6 intense rounds, with a 4-2 lead in Nimbus’s favor, Basalt grudgingly placed an order for more cards for a new deck.

It would take up the majority of her free time during her stay at home.

A Thorn in One’s Side Must be Plucked and Crushed

Gneiss, among her other siblings, had been her greatest source of aggravation since enrolling into the academy. He had been adamantly against her going from the very start, feigning concern to their parents about her “lack of skills” in the physical aspect of being a soldier. Her father had been on Gneiss’s side but, in the end, allowed her to go after Nimbus announced his backing of her choice and being her sponsor.

Gneiss stood no chance in favorability against Nimbus; father’s mind had never been so quick to change.

Now, unfortunately, her older brother made it a point to inconvenience her at every turn. Whether it was heckling her during spars or beating her in oral participation during classes, he wanted to make sure everyone knew he was the better gryphus between the two of them. She ignored him for the most part, putting on an air of someone so above him that she couldn’t be bothered, but she would

admit, there were days where she just wanted to punt the nuisance right into a canyon.

For all his childishness, Gneiss wasn't exactly being overt about his bullying towards her. He was kin, after all, and keeping the prestige of their family name was just as much a priority to him as it was to her. He was always clever about his sabotage, dastardly smooth in the way he ruined her days.

Basalt only drew the line when his interference actually cost her a perfect score in a practicum.

"It isn't my fault you didn't bother to read the list of requirements for today's drill, Cuckoo," Gneiss had mockingly frowned at her.

He dared to 'tsk' at her in disappointment as their instructor chided her for forgetting an item on the list her brother had given her.

...Of course, Gneiss *hadn't* given her any list.

But she had no proof to accuse him of it.

She was put on the bench for the lesson, made an example by the teacher of what happened to those who were unprepared for the tasks at hand. "On the battlefield, a mistake like that could cost you not only your own life, but those of your men," the older gryphus said. Basalt made sure Gneiss could see the rage in her eyes as he shoved past her.

Her revenge swiftly came a week later, during the mid-quarter practical challenge.

The practicum required her class to traverse a neighboring forest on foot, without the aid of maps or flight to see them to the end. They had to rely on clues from nature to guide them to the designated checkpoints along to the goal.

It wasn't a race, per say, but the first gryphus to make it to the end would obviously get extra credit. In this case, she didn't need to be first.

Basalt didn't rocket into the brush like the others did though. She lingered behind, watching where her *brother dearest* had gone off to, and followed him. She

kept her distance; she was near enough to keep track of him but far enough that he wouldn't notice her. Along the way, she subtly placed obstacles to hinder her brother's lackey's. She didn't want any witnesses.

She wanted Gneiss all to herself.

She managed to steer one gryphus into a rope trap, and another into a divot that got his foot wedged tight. One by one she separated Gneiss from his crew, keeping his suspicions at bay by periodically appearing before him just to spit taunts. "Do you need to be handheld to find the way, brother? Father would be disappointed," she'd say. And Gneiss would fall for it and spew curses at her in kind.

Basalt made it seem as if she was always ahead of him, egging him, mocking him for his apparent slowness. "I'm tired of waiting for you. I'll just head on and reach the finish line." With that, she watched, satisfied, as her brother angrily doubled his efforts to "catch up" with her. At one point, near one of the last checkpoints, Basalt sneakily changed the direction of the marker from east to south.

Gneiss didn't even bat an eye as he headed the wrong way.

And this is the sibling my parents had more faith in. Pah!

Once he was close enough to a gully, she carefully tipped some loose rocks from above him and watched them roll down. They slammed into him ferociously and toppled him over the edge. There was a heavy thud and a sharp crack, followed by an agonized cry. Basalt was quick to cover her tracks then and retreated quickly back to the marker. She waited for another schoolmate to reach it before casually, lightly, walking out of the brush.

"Oh! Basalt! I didn't think you'd still be around," the bluejay-panther greeted, clueless to what had transpired.

Basalt faked a helpless shrug. "I was waiting for someone to ask for a second opinion, actually! You see the sign?"

She pointed to the loose nail that she'd bent to change directions. "I think someone's tampered with it. If I bend it like this," she wrenched it back to its

original position. “It points east, not south!” Her classmate took the bait like a starving fish. “Unbelievable! The things some gryphus won’t do! Well, at least you didn’t fall for it, and now the others won’t either.”

“Naturally. If I want to win this challenge, I don’t want it to be because the others were handicapped,” she grinned sharply.

Her classmate guffawed. “The cheek on you! Anyway, good luck, Basalt!”

They parted ways then, and Basalt finally set her sights on actually finishing the challenge. She arrived at the end goal at a respectable 5th place in the end. It couldn’t be helped that her little detour had taken off some time in her race to the finish but 5th place had never felt so good. She accepted the little certificate from her teachers before meeting up with some of her peers. The one she’d met at the marker was there as well.

“Ah! There she is! Too bad about being fifth, yeah?” he laughed. It was a harmless tease, so she let it slip.

“We heard about that twisted marker! Really underhanded play, I must say,” a robin-wolf gryphus tutted. “It was kind of you to fix it though. I might have walked straight into a ditch or something if you hadn’t.” Basalt waved the praises they gave her with a small, gracious smile. “Tricks are for our enemies. And we are siblings-in-arms. What good is it to tear each other down now when we’ll need to watch each other’s backs as soldiers?”

She was met with a chorus of agreements.

It took about two more hours before the last of her schoolmates reached the goal. By then, the sun was beginning its descent. Gneiss’ absence was noted by staff and, at the worried request of his lackey’s set off to search for the missing student. Basalt tried to volunteer to help find him, along with a few, nicer students, but the teacher refused, stating that they didn’t need to lose more youths while finding one.

“Your concern for your brother is to be expected, but please leave it to the adults for this. We will bring him back to you,” her instructor patted her reassuringly on her shoulder.

She faked a somber nod.

Another hour passed until Gneiss was found at last. He was carried on a stretcher, badly bruised and cut up. His wings were bent at unnatural angles. “That looks ghastly,” she heard one of her classmates whisper.

“Totally fractured,” another said.

One student had gone pale, saying, “My uncle broke his wings like that; he can’t fly well anymore.”

Whispers of Gneiss’ career as a soldier being cut short rippled through the crowd. When the teachers informed them of where he’d been found – the gully south of the marker she’d tampered with – her classmates quickly brought it to attention. “Basalt noticed that someone messed with it! She fixed it so the others wouldn’t go the wrong way!”

Her teachers gave her an admiring look and commended her for her quick thinking. “Your quick thinking has probably saved many other students from getting injured. It’s just the sort of soldier our kingdom needs. Good job.” She even received some applause from her classmates. Their eyes looked at her in admiration. It was all too easy to put on a slightly shy expression, one addled by the sadness of having a “beloved” sibling battered so much.

Under the guise of wanting to be there for Gneiss, she went off to visit him in the clinic.

He was heavily sedated and bandaged up like a corpse. Pain-relieving herbs had him woozy and disoriented but he was there enough to notice her by his bedside. “Here to gloat, then?” he hissed weakly. “Bet you’re happy I’m like this, Cuckoo. They said I won’t be able to fly properly even when my wings heal.” He flinched when she reached out to him but stared at her, flabbergasted, when she gently combed some of his feathers back.

“Why should I be happy to see my brother tarnish our family name?” she said with a voice oozing with sadness.

She carefully angled his head better on the pillow and patted him on the cheek. “Your carelessness has cost you, Gneiss. Why didn’t you watch the hell you

were going? What if the teachers hadn't found you soon enough? I heard you were pinned by boulders! What if you—" The word 'died' lingered in the air, and with a sharp pinch to her sides, Basalt summoned tears to well up in her eyes. Gneiss looked at her as though she'd grown three heads.

"You'd actually be sad if I died?" he huffed, though his voice trembled with uncertainty.

She scowled at him with all the grief she could manage. "I hate you. I hate all the times you tried to slip me up in school.... But... You're still my brother. Of course I'd be sad."

Basalt quickly tried to wipe her tears away and put on a stubborn face. "Besides," she sniffed. "If you're dead, who else in our clutch would be my rival?" Like the final piece of a puzzle clicking into place, she watched Gneiss's face warble with tears, brows knitted in frustration.

"You'll have to find someone else. Father will likely transfer me to the politician track after this." Gneiss laughed bitterly.

Basalt shook her head. "So what? If you can't be the best soldier, then beat father at his game and be a better politician!"

She leaned closer then. "Our family hasn't had a council member in two generations. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise. You'd get sympathy from your peers and admiration for choosing to change tracks instead of just giving up. Besides, some of our older siblings are on that track. If you beat them, father will have no reason to complain about you." She watched the gears turn in her brother's head, watched his own cunning brain reroute the best possible path for him. A pregnant pause fell upon them both. Only the rustling of the trees outside broke the silence in the room. Basalt found herself idly fiddling with her brother's paw, clacking them around like she had long ago, when they were too young and ignorant to understand their fates.

She almost flinched when Gneiss suddenly locked his talons with hers. She locked eyes with him and saw – much to her amused disgust – how his gaze had softened. "Guess I'll be out of your feathers then, Cuckoo. You better not ruin the

family name when I'm gone. I'll be making a name for myself in the council circles.” he sneered.

For a moment, something old and vulnerable flickered in her mind, though she was quick to push it aside.

“I think you've done enough of that for both of us. You've got some climbing to do, brother. Let's see who reaches the top first between us, eh?” she smirked.

After bidding Gneiss goodbye, she headed back to her dorm room. Her emotions bubbled inside her. Some bit of guilt mingled amidst the powerful waves of self-satisfaction and utter glee. She had hoped her plan would work but to work this well? Oh, this was a victory she would bask in for all of her life.

Gneiss would be out of her way for good now. And with her little display of sympathy, she wouldn't even have to fear his retribution. If she were to be on the more optimistic side, she might even say she'd earned an ally on the political track. Her laugh went unheard in the deserted hallway she walked in. There was almost a spring in her step.

She'd dethroned a king and gained a pawn.

- Adult -

A Minor Bump to the Top

With her greatest competition gone, Basalt had no more distractions on her path towards power. She remained among the top achievers of her peers, and, due to her actions during the forest practicum, was held in high regard by them. The few who dared try to pull her down from her perch mysteriously met small tragedies. Perhaps they'd eaten something bad and had to miss days of classes. Or, maybe, a tampered set of equipment gave way and they hurt a limb. Basalt's personal favorite way of dealing with “nuisances” was letting her admiring peers criticize them into silence or report them to their teachers.

Right until the very end of their training, Basalt held an immaculate record.

Perhaps the only thing that one might consider a spot in her academic reputation was her rather... brutal ways of enforcing war tactics in theoretical classes. She had been warned more often than not to mind her needlessly bloody implementations of strategies, chastised when she'd argue that too much sentiment clouded a commander's judgment.

Even then, she had her supporters.

Basalt graduated in the top percentage of her batch, to the applause of her peers and teachers. Nimbus had been there for her graduation, along with her parents, who finally seemed to be taking note of her. Ah, but now... now they didn't really matter. She realized that her ultimate goal went beyond them, was to be above them. By the time she'd reached the precipice of her aspirations, it would be her *parents* vying for her attention. She could barely hold back the toothy grin on her face as she met their gazes - as they looked only at her.

Nimbus gifted her with a custom quill forged by some dromeus smiths, one she could attach to a paw for better, easier writing, in celebration for her graduation.

They played a few rounds of Daan and talked long into the night about her oldest brother's plans on how he'd be managing the family. It was, dare she admit, an amiable exchange between them. She still wouldn't call them friends. After all, they were really just using each other to get what they wanted. As long as Nimbus didn't get in her way, though, she didn't mind him all that much.

Her first years as a proper soldier had been gruelling. New recruits were always subjected to grunt work, to menial tasks. Even someone as brilliant as her would often be charged to wake up before the crack of dawn to raise the flag posts or help ready the training fields. It was humiliating - humbling, as her senior soldiers would correct - but it was an essential experience. Basalt made sure to do her best even at this.

She'd grit her teeth and do whatever it was her superiors commanded of her, acquiescence to any order. Her compliance and diligence was greatly appreciated by the older gryphus. The General at the time even acknowledged her as "the type of soldier all recruits should be like" during a routine inspection of her squadron's sector.

Her first brush with death on the battlefield had been terrifying and exhilarating. She'd taken down a good number of Rainforest rats in a surprise raid with very few injuries herself. The only notable wound she sustained was a chunk of her ear getting torn off by some harpy soldier. Some of her peers had hesitated ending the lives of her enemies but she didn't. She'd been waiting for this. This was her moment. She didn't hold back a bit as she helped her squadron achieve victory over their foes. Her ruthlessness in fights garnered quite the attention from peers and superiors alike.

There were, again, naysayers of course.

Thorns tried to pierce her again as she rose up in the military ranks. Basalt couldn't afford to be caught doing anything "heinous" to her fellow soldiers, so she learned to degrade her rivals' reputations by having them take on tasks they couldn't handle and revel as they were scolded in the inevitable failure of the task. They practically walked into her goads and taunts, so she was really just doing the army a favor by weeding out the weaker gryphus.

Only a few years passed before Basalt found herself promoted to the rank of Captain. She was quite young for her station but she had received such high remarks from her commanding officers that when her name was brought up as a candidate, few could really protest against the decision. Instead of serving her senior soldiers, now they listened to her command.

Her first action as a Captain had been widely controversial.

When faced with an oncoming attack from a Hippus battalion, she'd sent a group of five gryphus - the lazy ones who were entitled and complained a lot - to act as distractions. They had all been killed in the line of action but their diversion had led the enemy into a narrow gorge that allowed the rest of her men to secure a nearly flawless victory. They were even able to bring back a few prisoners for the army to interrogate.

Some Captains in the military were disgruntled at using such a brash tactic, stating that it was a waste of living resources.

More still praised her for such precise use of the soldiers she had.

At the end of the day, Basalt was acquitted of any fault in her choice.

As she gained more opposition from those in higher position against her and her ways, Basalt found it necessary to amass more allies to her cause, like-minded gryphus who shared her ideals and principles - those who did not let sentiment cloud them from making rational judgments in a merciless war.

Among the gryphus that she came to rely on, a courageously brilliant hen by the name Aedes was the most dependable. The three-legged soldier tended to err on compassion when it came to dealing with soldiers but Basalt could count on her to be rational and clinical when the time called for it. She forgave such a fault when Aedes provided her with such useful advice.

Things were really starting to look up. Surely a promotion wouldn't be too far in her career, Basalt would think to herself. Even when the other Captains doubted her for her inexperience and ruthless handling, or when her own soldiers looked upon her in thinly veiled apprehension, no one could deny that she did her job well. Her choices thus far in her military career had all been to her advantage....

...Until Aedes turned on her.

Her advisor, for all her brain and sense, turned on her, slashed her clean across the face, when they'd gotten into an argument on sacrificing a squadron as bait to lure their enemies. Perhaps the loss of the hen's own men had corrupted Aedes into falling for the trap of sentimentality. That's all Basalt could think of as she reeled back from the gushing pain on her face. She screamed profanities at her once loyal subordinate and ordered to have her imprisoned.

She'd wanted to execute the ungrateful wretch right there and then but Aedes was a slippery weasel and evaded capture. In the end, the army merely dishonorably discharged the shameful gryphus. Basalt veritably ended up destroying a very good mahogany desk in her rage, much to the terror of the young recruits posted near her room.

As furious as she was with her former advisor, Basalt had to admit she was partly to blame.

She had unknowingly grown soft, grown to depend on someone, to believe they'd have her back. She and Aedes had never been really close but she had somehow fooled herself into believing she was on her side. For whatever stupid reason. The scar Aedes' betrayal left behind on her face served as a permanent reminder to her from that day on. No one would ever get close enough to do this to her ever again.

Fool me Twice, Shame on Me

Aedes' betrayal had shaken Basalt more than she had first thought. She utterly detested how weary it had made her, *despised* the implication of why it affected her so much. As a famous Gryphus general once said: "The sad thing about betrayal is that it never comes from a stranger." The very thought that Aedes had been anything more than just a simple pawn on her board unsettled her. *When had she become more than that?* She didn't even fancy the hen in any way while she was still her advisor. She'd admit that she had come to depend on her.

But that was only because Aedes was that good of a soldier!

How dare her own mind try and confuse her!

How dare she try and fool herself into latching onto a dispensable subordinate.

Yet for all her self-admonishments and rationalizing, at the end of the day, when she looked at the scar that marred her gorgeous face, she could do nothing to stop the twinge of hurt that throbbed in her chest. After Aedes, Basalt kept all her soldiers at wing's length. Business was conducted with the utmost formality and she withdrew herself from any social interaction she wasn't required to pay attention to. Her charisma still enthralled all those who were there when she spoke but one would be hard-pressed to recall her sharing idle banter with her fellow captains outside of working hours.

Not even Nimbus had been exempted from the emotional distance she suddenly put between them.

When she came home for the briefest breaks, she'd indulge her brother - now officially head of the family - with a few games of Daan, and maybe some casual debates about things. However, whenever he approached any topic close to her scar, she harshly shifted the conversation elsewhere with a sharp glare at her oldest benefactor.

To his credit, Nimbus never pushed too far - but he'd bring it up one way or another.

"War tends to unhinge even the calmest minds, little sister. It can't be helped that lesser Gryphus may crumble against the pressure," he said, as his rook captured one of her pawns.

Basalt laughed humorlessly. "Bah! War. As wasteful of resources as it is destructive of our lands. The only good it brings is the possibility for power over nations and acquiring new land."

She moved her knight to capture his bishop, tossing the ivory piece to the side. "We've been at war for countless generations. We had plenty of resources back then and we were numerous in gryphus lives to send to the slaughter. But now? Most new recruits barely have the gall to slash at an enemy's throat."

Nimbus hummed in agreement. "We can't afford to back out either. It would paint our kingdom as weak."

"If we could just secure one victory with enough impact, we could force the other nations to back down. Finally end all this fighting," she said, groaning as Nimbus claimed her knight with a pawn.

Her oldest brother chuckled as he claimed yet another pawn, this time with his own knight. "Perhaps get yourself promoted one more time before you do that. If you aim to have all this end, at least be on top when you do." Basalt barked out a surprised laugh - this one genuine - and let herself relax ever so slightly as they carried on their match.

Nimbus won in the end, but Basalt left with a clearer head than when she'd come home with.

From Paranoia to Promotion

Aside from her little misstep with Aedes, Basalt's performance in the military was still nothing short of outstanding. One could even say she performed better under the support of their new monarch, Inula. The young Queen's first order had been to supply the army with better weapons and armor. Basalt had never sliced through enemy flesh with such ease in many a moon. The surge of investment in the military had given a surprising burst of morale amongst her men, and Basalt milked it for all it was worth.

Fewer gryphus were opposed to her sacrificial ways of securing victorious battles when they were blinded by patriotism supported by the monarch herself. She ran her troops to the ground and, with them, pushed back the hippus and harpy forces as far back as she could. Whatever ruthless plans and strategies she suggested in the war rooms, Basalt never hesitated to test out herself on the bloody fields. Most soldiers believed it was due to her fiery loyalty to the kingdom and thus they felt proud to serve under her.

The truth was that Basalt could really only trust herself to show them how it was done.

Her achievements soon caught the eye of the queen herself. Upon receiving an invitation to the royal palace, Basalt was graced by the beautiful and imposing form of Inula. The gryphus was her junior by a few years but the level of authority that hung around her was unparalleled. It filled Basalt with a reverence she'd only ever held for her brother.

This was a gryphus meant to rule.

The visit itself had been surprisingly casual. Presented with a game of chess, Inula asked her of her experiences in the military, of her thoughts on its logistics and of the way it was being currently run. Basalt respectfully answered with blunt honesty. She complained about the army's faults, and praised what it did right. She brought to attention things that could be improved and others that the army should just do away with entirely. All the while, their chess match went on with quiet

intensity. Every piece claimed and lost between them was always a calculated choice.

Inula won by the end of it, rightfully trapping her king with a rook and two pawns.

Basalt found herself happy, despite the defeat.

They parted on good terms, with a verbal assurance from Inula that she'd take the suggestions Basalt had made under serious consideration.

War raged ferociously after that fateful meeting however. An entire fleet of their own had been buried by a landslide caused by the harpies, costing the army dozens of good soldiers in consequence. The loss seemed to have demoralized their dromaeus allies, for less and less of their battalions were seen on the battlefield fighting alongside her own men.

Despite the odds stacked against them, Basalt stayed firm under Inula's orders. She would send every last battalion under her command to their deaths if it meant securing victories for their kingdom. She used all manner of emotional manipulation to keep the spirits of her men up, to goad them into a compassionate rage against the enemies of their homeland.

But Basalt was no fool.

She'd looked at all the charts and graphs.

Realistically, they wouldn't be able to last much longer.

Then the dromaeus queen recalled all of her soldiers, stating that she would no longer fight against their enemies. The queen brought up uncontestable facts of the instability of pushing the war on any further. Basalt could sympathise with the frustration that seemed to radiate of her own queen's body when she commanded them to withdraw from the battlefield. While Basalt and her men tended to their wounds, the announcement of a truce spread across the land.

The war was over.

The gryphus of the North could finally rest.

Basalt allowed herself to heave a sigh of relief despite the humiliating turn of the war.

Not long after the establishment of an uneasy peace, the acting General was dismissed from service. The war had been too much on them, apparently. They wanted to recuperate in their hometown, away from all the stresses of helping the monarch run a kingdom. In their absence, the position needed to be filled, and Inula recommended Basalt as a candidate.

There were unsurprisingly a number of gryphus opposed to letting someone like her gain such a prominent role in the government. Her bloodthirsty rationale may have been useful for a morally-questionable stage like the battlefield but it was prone to being detrimental for a kingdom seeking to find peace. Basalt came to defend herself, fully armed with not only her achievements from war but with her vast knowledge of economics, agriculture, and law. For every point raised against her, she argued back with the stinging bite of a whip.

“You say we are at peace but those who believe so are foolish and blind,” she boldly said, her gaze unwavering at the insulted gasps from the gryphus around her.

“We still have enemies, though they no longer wield weapons or faces. What of poverty? What of starvation? Has our nation not suffered immensely to supply the needs of our military forces? Have we not lost many valuable copper from the treasury to keep us afloat? Who among you has the gall to talk down citizens who will rage from having lost their children, their spouses? Who among you can meet their anger and subdue it without unnecessary bloodshed? Leave the gryphus to me. I shall be a barricade against their rage while the council can stabilize our economy and we can raise our heads proudly as a greater, more glorious kingdom!” Her voice boomed across the meeting room with such volume that it shook her own body.

Stunned silence followed after her “patriotic” argument. Slowly though, as others came back to their senses, they found themselves unable to argue any further. Basalt saw how Queen Inula looked at her with what could have been pride. The monarch thus ended the meeting with Basalt no longer a Captain but the General of the Northern Kingdom.

A few days after that, once Basalt had become accustomed to her role and delegating tasks to those beneath her, she requested an audience with her Queen. Inula, sat regally upon her throne, looked upon her with tired yet determined eyes. Truly, there was much to handle after so much loss and political ramifications “I would like to present a gift, your grace. To thank you for your belief in my abilities.” She handed an ornately wrapped box of solid mahogany to the younger monarch, watching tentatively as a gold-inked deck of Daan was revealed inside.

“It is a card game I made years ago. I’ve refined it since then but for the most part only me and my brother have played it.” She smiled to herself as Inula admired the detailing in the illustrations and of the ebony-feathered patterns on the black back of each card. “If you would give me the honor, I would be happy for someone as brilliant as you to judge my game. Perhaps, play a round with me, when we are not so inconvenienced by work?”

Inula said nothing at first, but then she picked up a card; it said: “For all the work you give, you must also offer respite for yourself.”

The queen graced her with a benevolent smile then. “I do love a good game.”

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With the signing of the treaty called off, the war was rising back up in an angry blaze.

Everything *seemed* to be going to plan, at least at first, but when the truth about Zinnia’s death got out, all hell broke loose.

With all the kingdoms against them, and Aedes’s gang of criminals spreading lies, it was only a matter of time. Basalt thought she handled it better than Inula, but ultimately it was a lost cause.

Basalt died at the beak of Aedes, whilst making a final stand in the palace courtyard. Her funeral was held privately at her family’s estate after Gneiss recovered her body.

