

MIGHT & MAGIC HEROES VII

SHADOW  COUNCIL

TALES OF THE TEN YEARS WAR

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Many of you have approached me, asking to recount the events of the last ten years. I'm beginning to understand that many outside of the Holy Empire didn't quite understand what was going on within our borders. As much pain as it causes me to recall the tragic events of this last decade, it is necessary if we are to bring an end to the bloodshed. This might take some time though. A lot happens in ten years, especially ten years of war.

But is the story I will tell you the truth? It would be presumptuous of me to say. I can only tell things as I saw them – my truth. Ask one of Seamus of Stag's advisors and he might spin a widely different tale.

843 YSD – FALCON'S LAST FLIGHT



If Empress Maeve Falcon committed a sin, it is certainly the sin of pride. It is often when you think you have everything under control that it all falls apart. The dangers of unreasonable pride will be a recurring theme in this story. So much that in centuries to come, historians may well call this war, “the War of Pride”.

Where to begin? Maybe with the prophecy.

At the dawn of our era, what the scholars call the “Historical Age”, Ronan the Great, High King of the Falcon Clan, defeated his rivals and had them bend the knee before him.

The Human clans were no more. An Empire was born.

It is said that on the day of Ronan's crowning, the Seventh Dragon himself, Sar-Elam, appeared to the new Emperor and talked with a voice that was both ancient and timeless. “Emperor of the Falcon!” he said. “Your blood is the blood of Men. For as long as your blood endures, the children of Ylath shall prosper.”

...Well, he probably didn't say these exact words, but all accounts at least agree to their meaning: as long as the Falcon dynasty existed, the children of Ylath – the Human race – would prosper.

But of course, Sar-Elam's words also turned the Falcon line into targets. The Demons of Sheogh, in particular, made several attempts against the Falcon Emperors through history.



HATEFUL PLANS

In 564 YSD, the Second Eclipse reddened the skies of Ashan, two years earlier than the Blind Brothers had predicted. The Demon Prince of Hate, Ahribban, who had been hatching plans to spread dissent and enmity within the Empire for years, personally led the siege of the Empire's capital city, Falcon's Reach. Emperor Liam Falcon died in battle, while Demon cultists led by the traitor Jezebeth hunted down his heirs.

Fortunately, the Duke of Griffin, Anton, managed to kill Jezebeth and rescue Liam's only remaining family: his niece Gwendolyn. The princess safe, the imperial armies joined forces to liberate Falcon's Reach and destroy Ahribban.

And so the infernal plans were thwarted, and the blood of Ronan kept flowing.

When the time of the Fourth Eclipse arrived, Empress Maeve was ready. The Blind Brothers had perfected their art, and this time their predictions were completely accurate. The Eclipse happened the very moment it was expected, and when the Demons unfurled upon the lands of the Holy Empire, the Knights of the Light were there to welcome them with blessed steel in hand.

Everything was under control.

But Empress Maeve was underestimating the current ruler of Sheogh, the one they call the Demon Sovereign. While the Demons were being routed on the battlefields, a party of assassins infiltrated the walls of Falcon's Reach. At their head was none other than Jezebeth, who had been offered – or cursed with, depending on the way you look at it – a second life in Sheogh as a Succubus.

Jezebeth was hell-bent on finishing what she had failed to do four centuries earlier. Jezebeth and her Demons stormed Maeve's throne room, killing the Empress and slaughtering her entire

family. Then, they burnt Falcon's Reach to the ground, to ensure no heir of Falcon would survive.

The Fourth Eclipse ended with the Demons' defeat... and their greatest victory.



BLOOD FOR BLOOD

Yet the world of Men didn't seem in a hurry to end. And for scholars, that could mean only two things.

The skeptics reasoned that Sar-Elam's prophecy could have been wrong all along, or at least misinterpreted. That happens all the time, really – just as you should never trust someone claiming to possess the one and only truth, you should never believe someone who claims his interpretation of a prophecy is the right one.

The faithful, on the other hand, claimed that Maeve's son Brendan had somehow survived the massacre of Falcon's Reach. As unlikely as it sounded, many in the Empire wanted to believe it. The Church of Light proclaimed there would be one year of mourning: if the child Brendan was found alive during this period, he would inherit the throne. If he was not found, then he would be declared dead, and a new Emperor would be chosen among the Dukes of the Empire.

That time was spent hunting the last pockets of Demon marauders. Among them was Jezebeth herself. It was Ivan of Griffin, leading a company of griffin riders, who located and cornered her. The Succubus had been trying to hide in plain sight, in the ruins of Castelrose, the old citadel of the Holy Inquisition.

It was no secret that Ivan had been good friends with Empress Maeve, and he showed her assassin no mercy. You probably know the folk song their encounter inspired? I think it goes like this:

*“She tried to cast her nasty spells
So he chopped off her hand
She tried to fly back to hell
So he chopped off her wings
She begged for her life
So he took out his sword
She promised to be his wife
And he made his blade sing
He chopped off her head
until he figured she was dead...”*

The lyrical qualities of this piece are certainly debatable, but that’s not the point. What is important is what the song doesn’t mention: the fact Jezebeth had one last bargaining chip to offer in the hopes of saving her sorry hide. In a last, desperate gambit, she offered information about the boy Brendan. But Ivan replied that he would never believe one word spoken by an assassin, especially a Succubus. And that’s when he cut her head off with a mighty swing of his sword.

With Jezebeth’s death, the Fourth Eclipse was finally over. But in the Empire the troubles were only beginning...

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844 YSD – THE CONCLAVE OF THE NEW DAWN



Maeve's death had been avenged. With Falcon's Reach reduced to a pile of smoldering ruins, the fallen Empress' body was taken to the imperial Summer Palace, near Whitecliff, in the Greyhound Duchy. There she received funerals worthy of her rank: her body was cremated, letting, as per the custom, her essence rise towards the sun towards Elrath.

No one could ignore the mounting tension during the ceremony. All the Dukes and Duchesses were in attendance.

Ivan of Griffin, Maeve's avenger.
Seamus of Stag.
Amílcar of Bull.
Rowena of Unicorn.
Enguerrand of Greyhound.
Stefan of Wolf.

If Maeve's son Brendan were truly dead, one of them would soon become Emperor or Empress.

Soon after Maeve's funeral, the Church of Light announced the creation of the Conclave of the New Dawn in the holy city of Flammschrein. This assembly of Angels, priests and scholars, led by the beloved Archangel and war hero Sandalphon, was to decide who would inherit the crown. Of course, even centuries after Uriel's infamous Deception, many citizens of the Empire still had reservations regarding the Church's impartiality, suspecting the Priests and Angels would simply pick the candidate that would serve their own interests best.



To alleviate these suspicions, Sandalphon decided to invite an Angel named Murazel to sit at the Conclave. *“Guardian of Hammer Fall, brave heart of the purest Light, I trust you. I trust you to help us choose the best possible Emperor for this great nation. I trust you to keep us honest and true. Will you join the Conclave of the New Dawn, and sit at my side once again through these testing times?”*

It was a brilliant move: Murazel was a figure of legend, known to favour Humans over her fellow Angels. She had helped the Free Cities of the East on numerous occasions, sometimes against the Empire, and her own kind considered her a renegade. If there was an Angel who would never compromise her ethics for personal gain or politics, it was Murazel.

Murazel accepted Sandalphon’s offer, and departed Hammer Fall for Flammschrein, putting an end to six centuries of exile.

A FALCON BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Of course, as soon as the Conclave was established, many young men arrived in Flammschrein, claiming they were Maeve’s son Brendan. The Conclave interviewed them, and in the end rejected them all. Some Conclave members insisted the rascals needed to be tortured or executed publicly, to set an example. True to herself, Murazel spoke vehemently against this solution, and proposed to send them to jail for one year instead, to “meditate” on their life choices. The wise Sandalphon approved Murazel’s suggestion. It proved dissuasive enough.

Several weeks passed, and the Conclave was still debating, or investigating leads regarding Brendan's possible survival. Within the Empire, tension was growing. Everybody had an opinion about who should sit on the throne. All Dukes and Duchesses had at least one Falcon ancestor in their family tree, and they were all building their cases, gathering genealogical documents and other proofs of their heredity.



The most obvious candidate was Seamus of Stag. The house of Stag was cousin to the Falcons, and it seemed this strong family bond could not be questioned. Yet some scholars pointed out that Seamus was not a descendant of the main Stag bloodline, which had gone extinct around the Second Eclipse, but of a remote branch, cousins by marriage. He had some Falcon blood, but not as much as he would have hoped.

These same scholars had their sights on a more potent candidate: Ivan of Griffin. It was brought to light that Ivan descended from both the Falcon and the main Stag bloodlines. The great hero of the Second Eclipse, Duke Anton, had later become Empress Gwendolyn's consort, fathering three children with her, the second of which then inherited the Griffin Duchy. But Anton's own mother had been Cate of Stag, the sole member of her house to have had children.

Needless to say, Seamus was not pleased by the work of these scholars.

WAR OF THE WORDS

Accusatory whispers started to spread in the taverns all around the Empire. These rumours claimed that it was Ivan who had led the Demons inside Falcon's Reach, hoping to inherit the throne after Maeve's death. If Ivan was innocent, then how did he know where Jezebeth was hiding? Was he really trying to avenge Maeve... or was he just making sure the Succubus would remain silent?

At the time, Ivan was courting Seamus' daughter, Nolwenn. As the rumour grew stronger, Seamus publicly forbade his daughter to see Ivan again. "The Griffin may have blood on his wings", he famously stated. Amílcar of Bull, who had inherited an old family grudge towards

the Griffins and had always distrusted Ivan, made accusations of his own, much less subtle.



The other Dukes were not so eager to join in Seamus and Amílcar's accusations, but they demanded that Ivan revealed how he knew where Jezebeth was hiding, to put this matter to rest once and for all. Stubborn and proud Ivan refused to explain himself. To you, my fellow shadow councillors, I can reveal he had learnt about Jezebeth from a trusted informant, and being a man of honour he simply would not betray his source. When Amílcar of Bull claimed Ivan's silence was enough proof of his duplicity, Ivan challenged Amílcar to a duel. "There's nothing I need to be ashamed of", he said. "Let Elrath choose who is telling the truth, and who is spreading lies!"

Two weeks before the anniversary of Maeve's death, Ivan and Amílcar met on neutral ground, in a small town called Brookshire, within the former Falcon province. Declaring himself Maeve's champion, Amílcar unsheathed his sword. There was tumult among the witnesses when they recognized the legendary Blade of Truth, the ancestral sword of the Falcon dynasty, one of the seven "Bastards of Elrath". Ivan saluted his foe with the Griffin's Blade of Revelation, and the duel began.

Ivan was younger, faster, more powerful, but Amílcar was more experienced, more skilled, more cunning. Their duel lasted thirty agonizing minutes during which it seemed they were evenly matched. The blades clashed, again and again. And the unimaginable happened: one of Ivan's blows shattered the Blade of Falcon to pieces.

Disarmed and shocked, Amílcar admitted his defeat. Ivan had proven his innocence in a fair fight, but an ominous feeling descended upon the audience. Many felt the broken sword was no coincidence: it was an omen heralding the end of the Falcon Empire.

Three days later, the bells of Flammshrein started ringing, but their song was dreary and doleful. It was a death-knell. Sandalphon was dead; a dark blade had been plunged into his heart. Murazel was nowhere to be found.

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845 YSD – OMENS OF WAR



The Conclave of the New Dawn had imploded in the wake of Sandalphon's assassination and Murazel's disappearance. The sanctity of Flammschrein had been compromised, prejudices and suspicions resurfaced, and the voices of reason were soon drowned in the clamour of old enmities and petty squabbles. Hopes of finding a suitable consensus were rapidly fading away.

The month of the Sun Blossom arrived, dedicated to the worship of Elrath, and there was no Emperor.

The 20th day of the Sun Blossom – the first Equinox, one of the Empire's most sacred celebrations – came and passed, and it was now clear the Conclave had failed in its mission. However, the imperial crown still needed a head to rest upon. Many prayed that Elrath himself would descend from the skies and pick a new ruler, but the Dragon-God of Light didn't intervene. This was something men had to sort out by themselves.

Like the distant rumblings of thunder announce the gathering storm, it was becoming increasingly clear that it would soon come to war. It was unavoidable. The only thing left to determine was where and when the lightning would strike first.

It struck on the 11th day of the Dancing Flames.

CASUS BELLI

In the first days of the Dancing Flames, militias loyal to either Duchy started to gather in and around the small town of Maiden Way, on the Greyhound-Unicorn border. Unrest had been growing steadily at since Maeve's funeral, fuelled by centuries of atavistic mutual contempt.



During the 10th night of the Dancing Flames, an alderman serving the Greyhounds was mugged and left to bleed out in the streets; a house belonging to a Unicorn magistrate was put to the torch with the family still inside. Either side was quick to accuse the other of these heinous acts. Truly, they were all waiting for this to happen, it didn't really matter who actually drew the first blood. A cause for war.

By noon the next day, all that was left of Maiden Way and its inhabitants were smoking ruins and mutilated bodies. The Greyhound militia stood victorious – if one would call that slaughter a victory.

Two days later, Rowena of Unicorn, the Redhead of Yorwick, sent a missive to Enguerrand of Greyhound, demanding explanations. But he only had accusations of his own to offer. Neither ruler could let the horrors of Maiden Way go unpunished. The rising tension had reached its apex. The word no one had dared speak was finally pronounced.



OLD ALLIANCES

If the conflict had remained confined to the Duchies of Greyhound and Unicorn, maybe things would have been different. But there were old alliances, signed in blood, ink and matrimony that demanded to be honoured. Amílcar of Bull sent his troops to reinforce Enguerrand's armies as they started to march on Rowena's lands. Paying heed to the old friendship between the Unicorn and Griffin Duchies, Ivan assembled his armies to fight at the Rowena's side.

Fearing Ivan's might, Enguerrand and Amílcar decided to act against his advance. Thousands men, women and beasts, led by Amílcar in person, marched north to intercept the Griffin army as it passed south of the Rose mountains. The Duke of Bull had a score to settle after his earlier humiliation at Ivan's hands.

Stefan of Wolf and Seamus of Stag didn't take sides. They watched from afar, bidding their time and waiting for the events to follow their course. But my spies reported that Seamus, unbeknownst to all, was secretly sending men-at-arms to the south. It soon became clear that his goal was to reclaim the old Falcon province for himself, including the ruins of Falcon's Reach...

The storm had begun, howling, torrential. And nobody could stop it anymore.

A QUICK SIDE-NOTE ABOUT IVAN'S SWORD:

It shall be noted that at that time, Ivan was not brandishing the Blade of Revelation anymore, but the Iron Feather, an old family heirloom that had belonged to his ancestor Ishtvan, the last King and first Duke of Griffin. After what had happened during his duel with Amílcar a few months before, Ivan had sworn to not unsheathe the holy Griffin sword until the Empire was made whole again.



The storm had begun, howling, torrential. And nobody could stop it anymore.

846 YSD – THE MAIDEN'S TEARS



At first, many still clung to the naïve idea that the Unicorn and Greyhound conflict would not spread to the rest of the already fractured Empire. The declaration of war occurred in late Dancing Flames, 846 YSD, and the first skirmishes took place during the months of the Shining Star and the Radiant Crown. Some optimistic fools believed the coming winter would cool the hearts and minds on both sides. But what was then still known as “the War of the Maiden’s Tears” was not to end so easily. That year’s winter proved soft and barely slowed down the armies.

Engurrand knew taking Yorwick was out of the question. His plan was to focus on the territories located on the western and eastern edges of the Unicorn Duchy. Bayworth, on the shores of Tirya Bay, was a tempting prize. And near the Empire’s heartlands, capturing Kilburn would cut off a good chunk of Unicorn land from Rowena’s authority. Rowena, on the other hand, went with a more direct strategy, and started to march on Millfield, the Greyhound’s grain store, hoping to ruin Enguerrand’s supply line.

By the spring 847 YSD, the real battles were about to begin.

A WAR ON THREE FRONTS

I won’t detail every single battle here, as they were the theatre of many feats and heroics and each battle could be the subject of a great song.



What you should know is that Enguerrand's armies, led by Garland of Blackstone, laid siege to Bayworth from Spider Queen, 846, to Azure Tides, 847, but they couldn't breach the city walls. The defenders, led by Baron Clive Morgan, exploited the old Tiryra smuggler routes to their advantage, to bring in food and supplies. When Unicorn reinforcements finally arrived from the North, Garland was forced to abandon the siege and retreat. Rowena's forces were less lucky in their own assaults. The battle of Millfield, which lasted from the 6th to the 11th of the Laughing Winds, was a disaster, a crushing defeat for the Unicorn Duchy.

Enguerrand had lost at Bayworth, but Kilburn was still within his grasp. However, he had not forgotten that Ivan of Griffin was on his way, to fight at Rowena's side. When news reached Ivan that Enguerrand was marching on Kilburn, the Lord of Griffin took his cavalry and rode west in all haste, leaving command of the main force to his trusted lieutenant, Justicar Tatyana of Stormgrad, known to her soldiers as the White Lioness. It certainly was a reckless move on Ivan's part, but you have to understand why he couldn't let Kilburn fall.



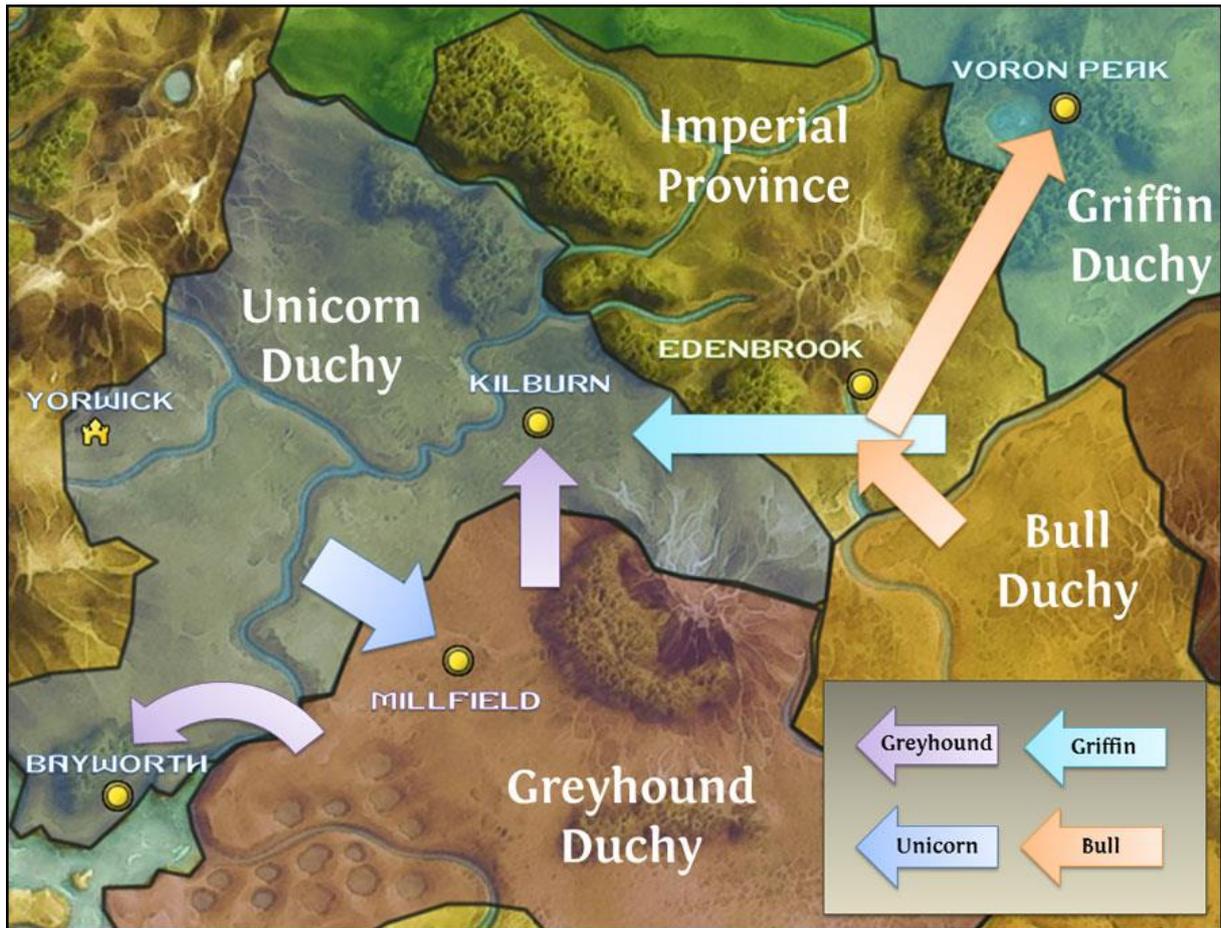
You might have heard stories about Lord Wilfred of Kilburn, the famous errant knight? During the Second Eclipse, this great hero journeyed to the Griffin Duchy and offered his sword to Duke Anton, becoming Anton's trusted friend and comrade-in-arms through many hardships. Some years later, Lord Kilburn became the new Duke of Unicorn. Duchess Rowena was Wilfred's descendant.

You understand then that by coming to Rowena's rescue Ivan was repaying her ancestor's help. By defending the city of Kilburn from the Greyhound's hunger he was honouring her ancestor's memory.

But as Ivan and his riders were joining Rowena's forces and getting ready to fight Enguerrand near Kilburn, everybody – myself included, I am ashamed to say – had forgotten about Amílcar of Bull.

THE BULL AND THE LIONESSE

On the 13th day of the Blood Moon, the Bull forces ambushed Tatyana's rearguard near Edenbrook, on the southern side of the Rose mountains. The White Lioness fought fiercely – she knew the Griffin army had to keep moving and reach the Unicorn Duchy at all costs. Taking three hundred men-at-arms with her, she did her best to shield the convoy from Amílcar's attack. Of Tatyana's brave soldiers, only one survived to tell the tale of her heroic last stand. Her sacrifice allowed most of the army to escape and reach the other side of the mountains.



His arrogance fuelled by his victory over the White Lioness of Stormgrad, Amílcar was quick to set his sights on a bigger prize: he pushed east, towards the Griffin Duchy, intent on seizing a piece of Ivan's land. On the 4th day of the Radiant Crown, his forces passed the Griffin border. On the 21st, Amílcar began the siege of Voron Peak. On the 25th, the city had fallen to the Bull.

On the 1st day of the White Maiden, Stefan of Wolf entered the war, sending his armies north to counter the Bull's advance. Far in the North, Seamus of Stag had spent the last months cutting down the forests on Irollan's border, gathering wood for purposes unknown. His plans were as inscrutable as ever, but it seemed obvious he, too, would soon join the fray...

A QUICK SIDE-NOTE ABOUT THE IMPERIAL CALENDAR

Some of you requested some explanations about the calendar we use in the Holy Empire and the way the months are named. I thought this calendar was widely used, but I guess a recapitulation cannot hurt:

1. **Moon Mother** (dedicated to Asha as the Mother, Giver of Life)
2. **Night Veil** (dedicated to Malassa, Dragon of Darkness)
3. **Sun Blossom** (dedicated to Elrath, Dragon of Light)
4. **Emerald Song** (dedicated to Sylanna, Dragon of Earth)
5. **Azure Tides** (dedicated to Shalassa, Dragon of Water)
6. **Dancing Flames** (dedicated to Arkath, Dragon of Fire)
7. **Laughing Winds** (dedicated to Ylath, Dragon of Air)
8. **Blood Moon** (dedicated to the fight against Urgash, Dragon of Chaos)
9. **Shining Star** (dedicated to Sar-Elam, The Seventh Dragon)
10. **Radiant Crown** (dedicated to the Imperial Dynasty of the Holy Empire)
11. **Spider Queen** (dedicated to Asha as the Crone, Queen of Death)
12. **White Maiden** (dedicated to Asha as the Maiden, Bestower of Fate)

Like most nations, the Empire has adopted the Elven tradition to have weeks of seven days, named after the Dragon Gods: **Malda, Elda, Arda, Sylada, Shalda, Ylda** and **Ashda**. Elda is a day of worship and rest in the Empire, while it is Ylda or Ashda in the Free Cities, Sylada in Irollan, and so on.

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847 YSD – DEAD OF WINTER



Stefan's bold and fearless tactics, which had been described as "foolhardy" by some, proved the Bull's demise. In the first two months of the year 847, no less than seven battles were fought in the wheat fields near Vladikraj and the Cherna hills. The Wolf lost two of them.

Before spring, it was clear the Bull had lost its chance to conquer the Griffin Duchy. Amílcar retreated to Voron Peak, but the Wolf drove him out of the city in a matter of weeks. Defeated, Amílcar ran back to his Duchy, with tail between legs.

But while the people of the Griffin Duchy were ready to hail Stefan as their saviour, they soon realized that the Wolf lord had not actually been defending the Griffin lands from the Bull. No, he simply intended to conquer them for himself.

THE WESTERN FRONT

In the West, Ivan's cavalry and Griffin riders kept harassing Enguerrand's vanguard and support lines, buying enough time for Rowena's forces to regroup with Ivan's reinforcements. Tatyana's sacrifice had not been in vain. Rather than entrenching themselves in Kilburn and risking a war of attrition that would have played in Enguerrand's favour, Ivan and Rowena decided to intercept the advancing Greyhound's forces in the open.



The two armies met on the 13th day of the Night Veil, not far from the small city of Ashwood. The battle lasted 3 days. The losses were heavy on both side, but the allied forces eventually took the upper hand, if only by a narrow margin. Ivan and Rowena decided to push their advantage, forcing Enguerrand to withdraw back behind his own borders.

Enguerrand's forces having been defeated north and south, the Unicorn Duchy was victorious. Ivan suggested the time had come to cease hostilities by offering peace. But Rowena ignored Ivan's recommendations, deciding to enter the Greyhound Duchy with her armies instead. Preoccupied by the news he had received regarding the situation in his homeland, Ivan gathered his own troops and began his long journey back east.

THE ICE DEMONS

Temperatures started to drop uncharacteristically throughout the month of the Shining Star. Scholars and weather wizards were all in agreement: winter was not going to be soft this time around. The winter of 847 was in fact the worst Thallan had known in decades, so harsh that even the intrepid Stefan of Wolf was forced to halt his invasion plans.



With incessant snowstorms sweeping across the countryside, trying to venture in the mountainous area where the Griffin's capital of Eastalon was located would have been suicide. Even Whitemane, in the valley below, had become too risky a target. The Wolf armies instead retreated to Voron Peak, located in a slightly more hospitable region, waiting for the weather to improve. But it was only getting worse, and they waited a long time. Too long.

By early Spider Queen, strange rumours began to reach Stefan's ears. The few travelers that dared venture in the frozen wasteland the Griffin lands had turned into brought back stories of a monstrous army of "Ice Demons", descending from the eastern mountains. The stories differed greatly when it came to describing the creatures, but they were all agreeing on one point: they were marching west, towards Voron Peak.

The Wolf lord refused to give credit to these tall tales, believing them to be mere propaganda intended to scare him away from the Griffin Duchy. Five years after the Fourth Eclipse, no Demons could remain on Ashan in such numbers. As for Ivan's armies, they were still far in the west. Finally, one thing was certain: no Human army was mad enough to travel in such harrowing weather.

He was absolutely right. He had simply forgotten an important fact: not all of Ivan's subjects were Humans.

On the 22nd Day of the Spider Queen, the "Ice Demons" were at Stefan's door. Led by Kente, Ivan's Master-of-Arms, the Orcs of the Whitespear tribe soon taught the Wolf lord the meaning of fear...



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848 YSD – THE BLOOD-DRENCHED HORNS



LONG FANGS

Descending from the eastern Griffin mountains in great numbers and seemingly unaffected by the snow and cold, the Orcs won a series of easy victories against the Wolf armies. The towns and villages that had fallen under Stefan's rule were liberated one after the other, until only Voron Peak remained occupied by the Wolf. Soon, these savage warriors swarmed the hills and forests around the fortress.

While the Orcs had little hope to take Voron Peak, they could keep Stefan trapped. The Orc leader, Kente of the Whitespears, was confident the Wolf would soon tire of his cage, and would then be willing to negotiate his release. All the Orcs had to do was wait and withstand the winter.

As soon as the first signs of spring appeared, Stefan of Wolf agreed to Kente's terms. The Duke of Wolf and his remaining forces were escorted back to the border of their Duchy, while the Orcs scattered in all major Griffin cities to reinforce their local garrisons. The message was loud and clear: the Griffin's nest was defended.



Kente took command of a battalion of Orc warriors and rode southwest, to regroup with Ivan's forces and inform the Duke of what the chieftains of the various Orc tribes had agreed upon.

BLOOD PACTS

In the meantime, Amílcar of Bull, beaten but not broken, was back in Chiaroscuro and licking his wounds. When he learned about Stefan's situation, he immediately started thinking of a way to use the Wolf's error to his advantage. While Stefan was trapped in the north, Amílcar could move his forces east and steal back some long-contested borderlands.

But Amílcar had suffered too many losses. He needed reinforcements – and he needed them fast, or his window of opportunity would close. He was still weighing his options when he was approached by a man, who had somehow avoided Amílcar's guards. The man's hair was black as a raven, his skin was pale, and his eyes glowing with a malevolent Green. Amílcar knew what the man was -- a Vampire from the devastated Vale of Heresh, in the far south.



Giovanni

When he was younger, Amílcar had fought the Necromancers of House Eterna in the War of the Broken Staff, nearly losing his life. He had shut away the memories of the horrors he had witnessed, the madness, the senseless devastation. He had somehow survived a close brush with Death, but feeling its unholy breath caressing his face had turned his hair white.

Amílcar didn't like the Necromancers, but he knew first-hand how powerful the Dark forces they dabbled with could be, and power was something he respected – and needed. So he decided he would at least listen to what the Vampire had to say. Especially as this particular Vampire was a kinsman – or had been, a long time ago. His name was Giovanni dela Segadora.

Giovanni had come to offer Amílcar an alliance, of sorts. The Necromancers would put several legions of Black Guard mercenaries under the Bull's command. In exchange, all they wanted was Illuma-Nadin. Erected on the border Heresh shared with the Bull Duchy, this Necromancer outpost had been conquered by the Wizards during the War of the Broken Staff, and had been occupied by the Bull's forces since then. Now the Spider Cult wanted it back.

Amílcar didn't hesitate long. Black Guard mercenaries were ruthless and knew no mercy, but regardless of their ties with the Deathlords of Heresh, at least they were living beings.

A few weeks later, the reinforced Bull armies launched their assault on the Wolf Duchy.



BETWEEN SHADRIS AND SORLETH

By summer, Rowena of Unicorn had conquered a large chunk of the Greyhound lands, and was ready to besiege Whitecliff. Her victory, however, was snatched from her when she received word that Seamus of Stag's armies had entered the Unicorn Duchy.

Thanks to the wood reserves they had gathered in the past couple of years, the Stag's war effort had not been impeded by the terrible winter. In fact, while the others Dukes had been fighting each other, Seamus had been reinforcing his own forces. Twintree and Dunmoor were quick to fall before the Stag legions.

A long and difficult siege awaited Rowena in the south, while her own lands were being invaded in the north. The Duchess of Unicorn had been reckless in her warmongering, and she now found herself, as the Elven proverb goes, forced to choose between Shadris and Sorleth.



Ivan too was facing an uneasy situation. Meeting with Kente near the abbey of Skarena, one of the Empire's oldest temples of Elrath, he learnt that most Orc chieftains had come to help the Griffin Duchy to honour the friendship their ancestor Kraal shared with Ivan's own ancestor, Slava. They now considered the debt settled, and apart from Kente and a small cadre of warriors, the Orcs would soon return to their mountains and stay out of the "babyteeth war", as they put it.

Looking for guidance, Ivan decided to visit the abbey, with the faint hope Elrath would show him a sign. Much to his surprise, two figures were waiting for him inside. One was an Elf druid, who introduced himself as Tieru. The other was the Angel Murazel... and she was offering to reveal the truth about Sandalphon's death.

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849 YSD – THE HOUR OF TRUTH



REVELATIONS

Soon after Ivan entered Skarena, the Elf Tieru summoned a Spirit Gate. Stepping through it, Ivan found himself transported to a distant place: one of the secret fortresses the Dragon Knights call the Hidden Houses. It is there, within the safety of these walls, that he would learn the truth.

Ah, I see that some skeptics among you are wondering how I know of their conversation. What kind of Spy Master would I be, if it was so easy to hide things from me? Suffice to say that I have my ways of uncovering information people would

like to keep secret.

Know also that what I'm about to reveal is something that can never leave this Shadow Council. Nobody would believe you anyway...



The abbey of Skarena

As it turns out, Tieru was not meeting Ivan as an envoy from Irollan, the Elven realm, but as a member of the Dragon Knights, that elusive group dedicated to preserve Ashan's balance between Order and Chaos. While the Dragon Knights had no intent on getting involved with a

civil war, they had a particular interest in the survival of the line of Falcon. Sar-Elam's prophecy made clear that the end of the Falcon bloodline would tip the balance in favour of Chaos, which was not something the Dragon Knights could allow.

Which is why they had offered Murazel shelter when she fled Flammschrein. Because Murazel had not fled Flammschrein alone. She was trying to put Brendan Falcon out of harm's way.

Five years earlier, a boy had been brought to the Conclave of the New Dawn. A hunter had found him in a forest not far from the ruins of Falcon's Reach, living like a beast among the animals. The hunter had brought the boy to Flammschrein, where Murazel and Sandalphon had been able to ascertain he was, indeed, Brendan Falcon. But there were... complications, and because of those, Murazel and Sandalphon decided it was better to wait before revealing the survival of the Falcon heir to the rest of the Conclave.

Someone must have discovered their secret, though, as one night, a group of assassins sneaked in the citadel of Flammschrein, intent on killing the boy. According to Murazel, these assassins were Dark Elves, but Tieru was adamant not to accuse the whole of Ygg-Chall without proof -- a mistake he had himself committed in the past. Murazel's descriptions of the assailants had led Tieru to believe they were part of a group of assassins-for-hire calling themselves the Blades of Erebos, after the great Faceless tactician of the Elder Wars. Sandalphon tried to protect Brendan, but the Blades proved well-versed in the art of fighting Angels, an art they had reputedly learnt from their legendary founder.



Erebos, the legendary Master of Assassins

Knowing she would be no match for Sandalphon's killers, Murazel did the only thing she could think of -- she grabbed the boy and took off in a flutter of golden wings, to seek the help of the Dragon Knights.

TIERU'S PLEA

Who had hired the Blades of Erebos? Neither Murazel nor Tieru knew with certainty. But they believed it was someone who had access to the Conclave, or had informants within Flammschrein. They didn't think it was a Demon plot. Rather, the act of someone with the ambition of sitting on the throne, which would not have been possible had Brendan been confirmed alive.

The Dragon Knights had observed all the Dukes and Duchesses of the Holy Falcon Empire. Of them all, there was only one they had confidence could not have been the mastermind behind the attempt. And it was Ivan.

But Ivan was not happy with what he was hearing. If Brendan Falcon was alive, why keep it a secret any longer? The civil war had been raging on for years, and countless lives had been lost. Whoever had tried to kill the boy had failed, and it was time for the Falcon to come home. Only then the Empire would know peace.

But Tieru shook his head, and took Ivan to another part of the Hidden House. Brendan's chambers.



Tieru, the Druid turned Dragon Knight

Murazel had mentioned complications. Now Ivan understood what she meant. Brendan was 18 year old, almost a man. But his behaviour was that of a small child. Tieru explained that seeing his whole family massacred by the Demons in front of his young eyes had shattered the boy's mind. This Falcon would never rule.

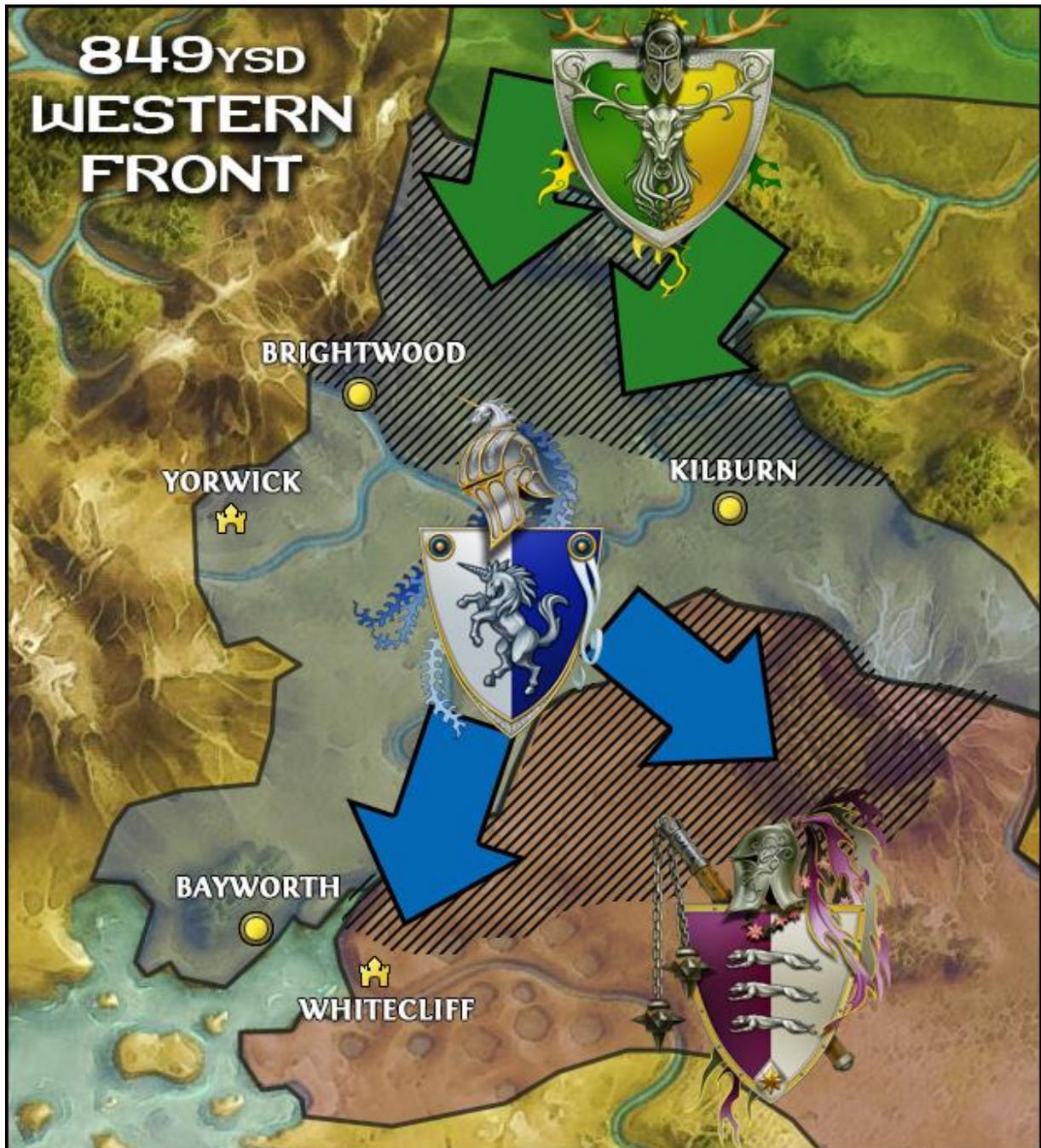
Ivan finally asked why Murazel and Tieru had brought him to the Hidden House to tell him the whole story. He already knew the answer. Because the Falcon line must continue to maintain the balance, but the Dragon Knights would have it endure in secret, far from the Empire, where no Demon or treacherous Duke can put it -- and the rest of the world -- in danger. Yet the Empire needed an Emperor, and they believed Ivan himself was the best candidate, and therefore deserved to know the truth, to fully understand what was at stake.

When Ivan was brought back to Skarena, he refused to talk about what had happened. His

mood was sombre, and so were his thoughts.

AN EMPIRE AT WAR

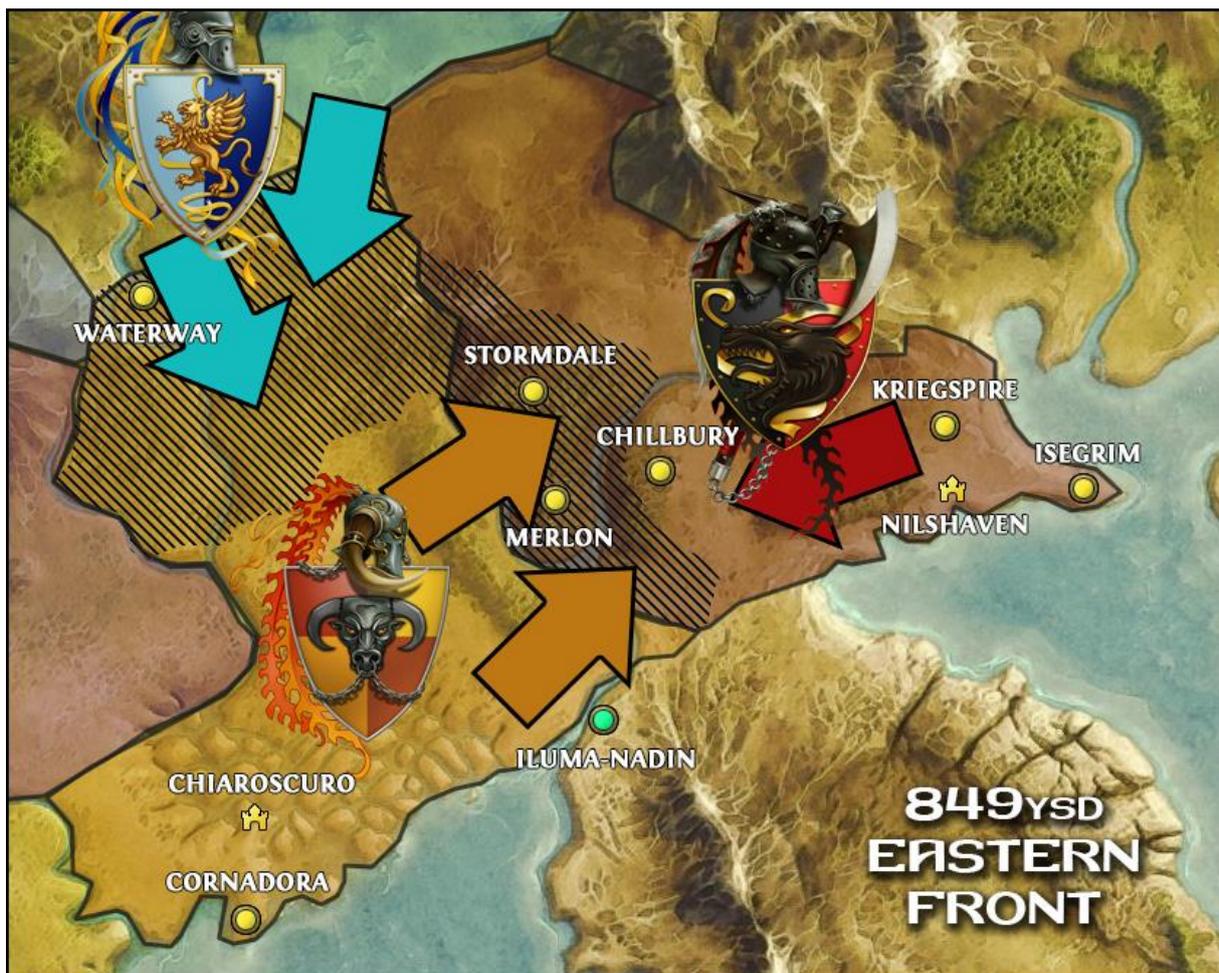
The year 849 YSD was the deadliest of the Ten Years War. In the west, the feud that had opposed the Unicorn and Greyhound Duchies had escalated into a three-way struggle following Seamus of Stag's northern invasion. Rowena of Unicorn had decided to push forward and lay siege to Enguerrand of Greyhound's fortress in Whitecliff. But behind her, all the way from the coast of Tirya Bay to the Rose Mountains, all was fire and blood.



In the east, Amílcar of Bull and his Black Guard reinforcements had dug deep into the Wolf's territory, taking Merlon and Stormdale, and marching on Chillbury. Stefan of Wolf had gathered his forces in Kriegspire and was preparing for a counter-attack. But he knew he had lost too many troops to the Orcs in the north. Sooner or later, the Wolf would kneel to the Bull. All he could hope was offer enough resistance to negotiate fair terms with Amílcar.

That's when Murazel appeared in Isegrim, Stefan's castle, with an offer. Ivan of Griffin was ready to pardon the Wolf's attack on his lands and strike an alliance against the Bull armies, if Stefan agreed to recognize Ivan's claim to the Falcon throne. All Wolf territories would be returned to their rightful lord.

What Ivan was offering was more than Stefan could hope from Amílcar, and Ivan knew it. Without even waiting for Stefan's answer, the Griffin armies entered the Bull Duchy and quickly captured the trade city of Waterway. Then he pressed south. The following months saw many battles, both in the Bull and Wolf Duchies. The combined armies of Ivan and Stefan even took Chiaroscuro itself, forcing Amílcar to flee to his summer palace, Cornadora, with his mercenary forces abandoning him to his fate. On the 14th day of the Month of the Radiant Crown, with two armies at his gates, the Duke of Bull finally yielded.



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850 YSD – THE STAG EMPEROR



AN UNEXPECTED ANNOUNCEMENT

After the defeat of Amílcar, the alliance between Griffin and Wolf marched west, with the intent of supporting Rowena of Unicorn who was struggling to wage war on two opposite fronts. But soon after they had passed the border between the Bull and Greyhound Duchies, unexpected messengers presented themselves to every single commander, generals, and of course Duke and Duchess. To say these couriers materialized out of thin air would not be an overstatement. They were the Glories of Elrath.

These Light Elementals were often used by the Church of Light when they needed to deliver messages in a timely fashion. This time, the message the Glories were delivering was simple: an Emperor had been chosen. And that Emperor was none other than Seamus na Feidh, Duke of Stag.

The news came as a great shock and surprise to most belligerents, as the Church had remained relatively quiet in the previous years, and after the debacle of the Conclave of the New Dawn, their legitimacy to choose a new ruler for the Empire was heavily disputed. As it turned out, the Church had rallied behind the charismatic figure of Archbishop Wilhelm. A hero of the War of the Broken Staff, Wilhelm had chosen to support Seamus' claim, and had managed to convince the ecclesiastical authorities to do the same, in the interest of pacifying an Empire that was ripping itself apart.

After seven years of war, the people of the Holy Empire were all too willing to let the Church decide who should rule them in exchange of a return to peace and stability.



Seamus na Feidh, Duke of Stag

Immediately, Enguerrand of Greyhound and Amílcar of Bull put their pride and ambition aside and swore fealty to the new Emperor. A few weeks later, under pressure from her people, Rowena of Unicorn had to lay down arms and bend the knee. But while the announcement had effectively brought a temporary end to the fighting, peace was still a faraway dream, as Ivan and Stefan still refused to acknowledge the new Emperor.

THE INNER CRUSADES

Seamus set his imperial court in Horncrest, which was already the capitol of the Stag Duchy. One of his first imperial decrees was to repatriate the Crusader Orders. These regiments were the remnants of the forces that had once hunted the Orc rebels to the ends of the known world.

Scattered in the Sahaar Desert and other dangerous areas on the Empire's borders, the Crusaders had spent the last few centuries keeping a watchful eye on the Empire's neighbours. Only the Emperor had the power to recall them.



Horncrest, capitol of the Stag Duchy

In a public address amidst the ruins of Falcon's Reach, Seamus tasked the Crusaders with bringing bread and other resources to the most devastated areas of his dominion, crafting for himself the image of a just and generous ruler. He quickly became popular among the citizens of the Empire.

Ambassadors of the neighbouring nations made the trip to Seamus' court, to gauge the new master of the world's most powerful nation. We are lucky that the delegation sent by the Silver Cities included none than Ivan's old "friend", Tanis of House Anima. After a few months at Seamus' court, Tanis began sending Ivan reports of the matters discussed in Horncrest, and what was truly going on in the Stag Emperor's lands.

Seamus had explained the Crusaders would help restore order and justice in the Empire, as most of the Empire's armies had been decimated during the seven years of inner conflict. But Tanis' information made apparent that their real purpose was actually to enforce Seamus' authority, by force of arms if needed.



A Crusader commander

Many arrests were made to get rid of “seditious elements”. Villages were burnt to the ground for having displayed sympathies towards Ivan or Stefan in the past. While Seamus was distributing bread in one of the Empire’s corner, his Crusaders were perpetrating mass executions in another.

RESUMPTION OF HOSTILITIES

Even after Tanis' reports had been confirmed by my own agents, Ivan was not willing to take any action against the Emperor. There was one last person he wanted to get in touch with before going to war. That person was Nolwenn, Seamus' eldest daughter, with whom Ivan was in a relationship before the war. Ivan remembered Seamus as a good man that Nolwenn loved dearly -- he needed to know how much of it remained in the man now sitting on the imperial throne.

After many manoeuvres and shenanigans that would be too long and tedious to detail here and now, I managed to arrange a meeting between Nolwenn and Ivan in Talonguard, a castle built by Ivan's ancestor Anton of Griffin.



Nolwenn na Feidh, Seamus' daughter

According to Nolwenn, her father had grown obsessed with the idea of becoming Emperor after

Maeve's death. Now that he had achieved his goal, he was subject to frequent mood swings, as well as fits of anger and depression. At first Nolwenn had interpreted this behaviour as resulting from the -- understandable -- stress of his new responsibility, and had been doing her best to appease him. But Seamus was becoming less and less tolerant of his daughters' kindness, even growing suspicious of her motives. A few days earlier, he had accused her of conspiring against him. Nolwenn was pained to admit it, but her love for her father was turning to fear.

By the time she left, Ivan had made up his mind. Using Talonguard as his base of operations, he would gather his and Stefan's forces, march on Horncrest and remove Seamus from the Holy Throne. Of course, thanks to the information I had obtained on my end, he already knew that beyond the borders of the Stag Duchy, Seamus was also preparing for war...

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851 YSD – SCARS OF WAR



THE PRICE OF LOYALTY

On the other side of the North River, Seamus was moving his troops. Regiments sporting the green and gold banner of the Stag were gathering around Dun Carria. He called upon his vassals to become his first line of defense against the Griffin-Wolf alliance. Amílcar of Bull himself was given command of Ronan's Gate, the old Angelic fortress built on the Stag border, just north of the hill where Falcon's Reach once stood.

While many would have seen it as an honour, the proud Amílcar was reportedly not too happy to become "Seamus' doorman".



Meanwhile, Enguerrand of Greyhound's forces marched north, although their progress was slowed down near Timberwood during a series of skirmishes with a company of Windswords led by Andras of Hammer Fall, a mercenary of honourable reputation. Now mercenaries only work if an employer pays them. I have gathered clues leading me to believe Andras might have been hired by Irollan to impede Seamus' war effort, although other clues have drawn my suspicions towards the merchant guild of Eridan Crossing.

Coincidentally, Rowena of Unicorn's own contribution to Seamus' reinforcements was much lower than expected. According to the Redhead of Yorwick, too many of her soldiers had died during the last seven years of conflict, and these meagre forces were all she had left. And while this in itself doesn't prove anything, my spied report that Rowena asked her captains to reach the Stag Duchy through less-traveled roads – more specifically, not the ones Enguerrand's troops had taken...

Seamus' eyes were fixated on Talonguard, where Ivan had moved his quarters. Back in the sixth century, Talonguard had been established as a peaceful refuge, where Empress Gwendolyn and her consort, Anton, could escape from the politics and endless intrigue of the imperial capitol. War was now reclaiming it.

WINDS OF WAR

By the early days of spring, Ivan made his move. His target was not Dun Carria, as Seamus was expecting, but Brynwood. If the Griffin-Wolf alliance could take this city, then it would have an almost open road towards Horncrest. While Ivan's forces were entering the Stag's domain from the south, Stefan of Wolf was launching a simultaneous attack from the east.

While I admire my lord's audacity, I have to say his plan was far from faultless. Seamus had been at war before, and was not so easily fooled. He also had the council of Archbishop Wilhelm, who had fought a long war of attrition against Archon Belketh in the War of the Broken Staff. The Stag Emperor ordered several regiments stationed in Forkriver to reinforce Brynwood's garrison, while Enguerrand's armies were sent to Meadowfair, providing a crude, but efficient second line of defence.



Archbishop Wilhelm

To counter Seamus' tactics, Ivan was finding himself forced to change his plans in all haste and press north. He needed Stefan to be successful at Brynwood, as they would then be able to reunite their forces to march on Meadowfair. But first, he had to capture Forkriver.

Ivan thought of himself as a man of honour, a man that would spare innocent life when possible. But there's no such thing as a clean war, and time was of the essence -- Ivan needed to cut Forkriver's supplies without delay, to avoid a long siege that would only benefit Seamus. There was only one way to achieve this goal: burn the fields, the farms, the orchards. Peasants who refused to abandon their lands were left to burn with them. That's how Ivan gained the first of many nicknames: Ivan of the Ashes.

Following Brynwood's fall, the Wolf and Griffin gathered their forces and marched west, towards Horncrest, leaving a trail of fire and death behind them. In the Stag lands, he was not

even known as Ivan anymore -- he was the Bloody Griffin, Ivan the Starver, Lord Cold-heart, the Bane of the North, the Oathbreaker, the Betrayer. Each of these nicknames became a burning scar on his soul. Ivan's plan was back on track, at the price of his reputation.

Seamus' armies, led by the Stag Emperor himself, had joined Enguerrand's troops in Meadowfair. As autumn descended on the lands of the Stag Duchy, the greatest battle of the year 851 was about to begin. But you already know it ended – had things gone differently, this council would have no reason to be held. Meadowfair was the Griffin's darkest hour.

THE GATHERING STORM

You probably heard the story of the duel Ivan fought against Seamus on the battlefield. How the "traitorous" Duke of Griffin had once again underestimated his opponent. How Seamus was not only a skilled swordsman, but also a master of the arcane arts, how his magic had turned the tide of the battle, and how the renegades were forced to run for their lives "as if Crag Hack himself was on their heels", as the old proverb goes.



But Ivan and Seamus never actually crossed swords in Meadowfair. As always, truth and legend intertwine. The Stag Emperor indeed proved a powerful magician, but it is precisely why he was actually far behind the frontlines, using his magic to support for his troops, and not in the melee. The one Ivan really faced that day was Enguerrand of Greyhound. Enguerrand was wielding the Blade of Loyalty, one of the seven bastard swords of Elrath.

History likes to repeat itself. Once, Ivan had shattered the Blade of Truth with his own Blade of Revelation. On that autumn day, amidst the blood-soaked fields of Meadowfair, the Blade of Loyalty ran through Ivan's sword, Iron Feather, the sword once wielded by the founder of the Griffin line, and broke it into dozens of pieces. An iron shard flew into Ivan's face, opening a gaping wound across the right side of his noble visage. It is a miracle he didn't lose his eye.

The Blade of Loyalty could never lose against a betrayer...

As Enguerrand was about to strike the fatal blow, putting an end to Ivan's rebellion, a strange bird came out of nowhere and distracted the Duke of Greyhound, giving Ivan's loyal Master-of-Arms, Kente, an opportunity to take his wounded lord away. Suddenly ice and lightning were raining on the Stag and Greyhound soldiers, causing great confusion across their ranks. As the mysterious blue bird guided Kente and Ivan to safety, it became apparent the delegation from the Silver Cities – or at least part of it – had decided to turn against Seamus.



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852 YSD – THE GRIFFIN’S RESOLVE



THE LONG ROAD HOME

Following the bird allowed Kente and Ivan to regroup with the dissident Wizard forces, which, and it shouldn't come as a surprise, were led by lady Tanis. The unity of the Silver League had fractured on the question of an alliance with Seamus, and Tanis had managed to convince several of her Wizard colleagues to side with Ivan instead.

Yet she had not sent the bird to Ivan – the bird had actually come to her. The creature was ancient and powerful, a Spirit more than an animal, and it had delivered a message to Tanis. Bluebeak, as it called itself, had urged the Wizards to come to Ivan's aid, as without their intervention he would meet his doom at Meadowfair.



Bluebeak

Who could have sent this bird to Tanis? This answer was obvious to me, of course, as I had already encountered Bluebeak in the past, and had fond memories of its mistress. I had heard she had disappeared during the Purge of the Necromancers, but she had always been smart and resourceful. I had no problem imagining her finding ways to cover her tracks, even from the likes of me.

I shared my suspicions with the Duke on our way back to Talonguard. He nodded absently, his mind aggravated by something else. Around us, it was all burnt villages and devastated fields; mass graves, famine, plagues, decimated families. Ivan's defeat at Meadowfair had scarred his face but opened his eyes. He had been focusing on winning the war for so long, it had all become abstract to him. Now he was seeing the toll the war had been taking, and who had paid it in full.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

As I had surmised, Anastasya Griffin was waiting for us at Talonguard. I had not seen her in three centuries, but she had not changed at all – although her eyes were colder than I remembered them.

Of course, I had to explain to Ivan some chapters from the secret history of his family, and of the incredible fates of his ancestors, Duke Slava's children. If you wish, I can recount their stories for you as well, my fellow Shadow Councillors, you only have to ask. Although that would be a tale for another time.

Throughout history, a few members of the Griffin line had left the Empire to walk... different paths. Like her great-aunt Sveltana, Anastasya had become a member of the Spider Cult, a Necromancer. But she was still loyal to her name, and had come out of exile to help its current bearer. She had sent Bluebeak, her familiar, to Tanis, knowing she was her best bet to save Ivan at Meadowfair.



But it rapidly became obvious there while there was some begrudging respect between the Wizard and the Necromancer, there would never be neither friendship nor trust. The horrors of the Purge and of the War of the Broken Staff were still too young. As for Kente, well, he was wary of all Wizards, regardless of the colour of their robe. Needless to say, the halls of Talonguard soon became a rather... lively place.

Ivan however was oblivious of their constant quarrels and incessant bickering. His defeat at Meadowfair, the destruction of Iron Feather and the devastation he had witnessed – and often caused – had all but neutered his fighting spirit. The war was still raging on beyond Talonguard's walls, and Ivan was still leading the Griffin-Wolf alliance, but his heart was not into it anymore. The daring commander he had been a few months before was planning his next moves with a sense of fatality, not purpose.

Later that year, the Angel Murazel returned to Talonguard with a man named Bleddyn. He was a Bloodsmith of Hammer Fall, a crafter of enchanted objects. Murazel had asked him to forge a new sword for Ivan, in the hopes of lifting the Duke's spirits. Bleddyn left a few days later, promising he would be back before the year was done.

GATHERING OF THE COUNCIL

As the first snowflakes began to fall on Talonguard, Bleddyn returned. Hearing the news, Anastasya, Kente, Tanis and Murazel all gathered to Ivan's war room, to see the sword he had forged for the Griffin Lord.

"The secret of Bloodsmithing", Bleddyn explained, "is to understand that weapons are not just metal, they are living things. They become part of their master's very being. Iron Feather has accompanied the Griffin family through centuries of war and countless hardships, Duke Ivan. It was a symbol of the Griffins' indomitable spirit and when it was destroyed, a part of you, of what makes you a Griffin, died with it. Simply giving you a new sword would not help you."



To get a sense of who Ivan was, and what would make him whole, Bleddyn had used his last visit to talk to everyone that was currently in the room.

From me, he had learnt of Ivan's tragic past, of what had happened to his father and brother when he was but a child.

From Anastasya, he had learnt the complex tale of the Griffin family.

From Kente, he knew Ivan's courage and sense of honour.

From Murazel, he knew Ivan's sense of duty.

And from Tanis, he learnt of Ivan's... fickle heart.

And so he had given the sword a name, symbolizing what Ivan had lost. He had called it the Griffin's Resolve.

After Bleddyn the Bloodsmith had left the room, Ivan spent long moments admiring his new blade, but his gaze also drifted to all the people – Angel, Necromancer, Wizard, Orc and Faceless – gathered around the table, around himself. And finally, he spoke:

" War is ravaging our lands. Brothers fighting against brothers... I need to stop this madness. But I cannot do it alone."

He took a deep breath.

" This sword made me understand what I was failing to see before now: that I need you, all of you. You are what I've been missing all along. Harsh times require an extraordinary council... like none the world has ever seen. United in purpose, we shall win this war!"

Ivan's Council was born that day. And it is now up to us, to all of us, to write the final chapter of the Tales of Ten Years War.

