



Stalkiymer sheathed his beautiful, hideous iron-cobalt blade, staring down at the dying Phynn. Nightmare couldn't tell, for Stalkiymer was facing away from him, but he knew instinctively that an evil smile now creased the Wielder's lips.

"And so ends the age of the Worldbuilders, the Wielders, and their poor excuses for laws," Stalkiymer announced, perhaps to himself, perhaps to all who were listening. Rather than in a glorious, victorious tone, he simply stated it nonchalantly, as a fact— whether this was an intentional irony, Nightmare couldn't tell. "Granted, it fell far more easily than I expected, but that's beside the... ahem." Stalkiymer cleared his throat, pivoting on his heel to address the Chesian and Antiarive forces that hadn't deserted— or perished.

Nightmare felt a lump in his throat. 'Don't show it', he commanded himself. Don't let him get the satisfaction. And so Stalkiymer raised his voice once more.

"WELL, I WAS HOPING YOU ALL WOULD TAKE THE EASY WAY TO THE NEW AGE," he shouted— as though he was speaking to a friend, in some perverted, hideous inversion of reality— "BUT AS IT STANDS, YOU ALL CHOSE TO DEFY US. LET'S SEE HOW WELL THAT TURNED OUT. HOW UNFORTUNATE.

"YOU CAN SEE YOU ARE DOOMED. YOUR LEADER IS DYING, WITH BARELY MORE THAN A FEW SECONDS TO LIVE. YOU HAVE NO ARMY, AND WHAT YOU DID HAVE IS NO MATCH FOR OUR FULL MIGHT."

Now Nightmare had to really try to keep it together— to stop himself from breaking down into tears, or exploding and launching himself at Stalkiymer in a suicide mission.

Stalkiymer continued. "YOU HAVE TWO WEEKS TO REPORT BACK TO YOUR RESPECTIVE CAPITALS. THERE, YOU WILL GIVE THE WORD THAT THE WAR IS LOST— THAT YOUR NATIONS ARE UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE GREAT NEW CASCAN REPUBLIC. I BELIEVE THAT—"

From the west, Nightmare could hear a faint snort of disapproval. Wolfgang Wendelken.

Stalkiymer whipped his head around to the source of the noise. “Wendelken!” he spat, pointing at Wendelken with his cobalt blade as he advanced menacingly. “What was that for?”

Knightmare watched Stalkiymer advance on Wendelken. He crossed the gap in but a few strides, glaring at Wendelken with such a fury that Nightmare wouldn't have been surprised if Wendelken died on the spot. “Republic. That's funny.” Wendelken snorted again, his arms crossed in absurd defiance. It seemed that now, he really didn't care whether he lived or died.

Enraged, Stalkiymer spat on the ground in front of Wendelken. “You're one to talk, old friend. You saw firsthand the democratization of the Empire— you made it happen! Along with me! Surely you see what we have now!”

“I was there— and you can't tell me that you idiots are a democracy now. Certainly not with a straight face.” Stalkiymer raised his sword up to Wendelken's throat, the pointed end of the blade just barely scratching him.

What is he doing? Nightmare panicked. He's going to get himself killed!

“I would be very careful about what you're saying, Wolfgang,” Stalkiymer cautioned, his voice shifting from aggressive to threatening. “If you are going to be this rebellious now, defending the archaic laws you once denounced, imagine how you'll suffer after you've become accustomed to the Cascan way of life— the new way of life in the Far North, whether you like it or not.”

Wendelken gave a sarcastic chuckle. “Yeah, whatever. Don't 'Wolfgang' me.”

And that was the comment that pushed Stalkiymer over the edge. In fact, if it hadn't been for a major miracle, it would have been the end of Wendelken. Nightmare could see Stalkiymer twitch his hand back, leaning forward to put his blade through Wendelken's throat like a spear.

But fortunately, at that moment, the Worldbuilders chose the perfect moment to bestow some good luck upon the allies. For it was then that a roar came from the other side of the battlefield.

“STAND DOWN!”

Stalkiymer stopped his attack on a dime, snapping his head around to see the source of the noise.

It was Phynn still on the ground, still clutching his shoulder— but not dead, barely even bleeding, seemingly recovered.

Even a Wielder would have bled out by now. How did he survive?

Stalkiymer stormed over to the collapsed Phynn. “How are you still alive?!”

But Phynn didn't take the time to answer. In a flash, he drew his jeweled sword and pointed it straight out at Stalkiymer. Stalkiymer jumped back. He, and everyone else at the battlefield, seemed to sense that something had changed about Phynn.

They sensed that all the rules had been thrown out, and that something incredible was going to happen.

Phynn stood up, slowly, deliberately.

Stalkiymer backed away a bit more.

Phynn kept his sword trained on Stalkiymer.

Until he didn't.