Fractured Kingdom

The year was 1111, but it wouldn’t be for much longer. The eleventh month was waning and readying for the twelfth. Euric Reiksmann sat on his throne, gazing at the sunset. The highest tower of his palace was facing directly toward it, so he had a large, elegant window made to showcase the beautiful sun that orbited the planet.

His throne was crafted out of the finest stone available embedded with gold chips and cut diamonds. The fires next to his throne were beginning to dwindle, but he would be retreating to his quarters soon enough. He closed his eyes for a moment, beginning to-

“Your majesty?” said a voice.

His eyes flew open as he wondered who in their right mind would annoy him, much less at this time of day. Hial Fynna, his minister of Justice, stood clothed in her official purple and red robes, looking up at him. She was short with light red hair that flowed down a bit past her shoulders and had bright eyes that practically burst from her skull. Euric supposed she was pretty but didn’t much care for anyone in his Empire except for his aging mother. “Minister,” he groaned.

“I have updates from the Outskirts.” Ah yes, the Outskirts. The Outskirts provinces were governed by the children of Dukes and Duchesses that Euric’s father had hand-picked, but Euric himself didn’t much care for any of them. They had been mildly troublesome for years, but lately they had been talking outlandishly about secession.

“Please tell, minister.”

“Duke Selim of Reistanbam, along with Governor Mas of Mayertran, have formally announced secession from the Renian Empire.” She unrolled a scroll and began to read from it.

“In response to unreasonable, unneeded taxation on the population, Duke Selim of Reistanbam and Governor Mas of Mayertran are announcing that with the power and jurisdiction invested in them by the Renian imperial crown, they are formally announcing secession from the Renian Empire in order to improve their and their population’s quality of life, effective immediately.”

Euric rolled his eyes as he scratched his rough, short beard. “Send a contingent,” he ordered, waving his hand.

“There’s more. General Nave has endorsed their secession.” Of course. Nave. He had always been a bit untrustworthy, but Euric kept him around because he was a good tactician.

“Thank you, Minister,” said the emperor as he waved his hand. Hial stood right where she was. “I said thank you, you are dismissed.”

“Haven’t you a plan?” Hial challenged.

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Euric responded flatly. “Dismissed.”

“I can’t believe you’re just going to let this empire your father built crumble.” Hial was smart, which sometimes led to cockiness. The only reason she was still in power was because her father had helped Euric’s build the country. Personally, Euric distasted the idea of a woman being so powerful, but while his mother was still alive to try to keep him in line, Hial was here to stay.

Euric was starting to get annoyed. “What would *you* recommend I do?”

“Maybe try to resolve problems in person instead of just throwing around men.”

Euric sighed. “Ready the horses then.” He turned to his servant. “And don’t do it slow.”

Nalced pocketed the gold coins and walked down the steps of the governmental building. He was the Chief Minister of Renai and took his job seriously. After all, bribes wouldn’t make themselves. He laughed as the snow drifted down onto his head.

He was first in line to succeed the throne, if need be. And it needed to stay that way. The emperor was old, but Nalced realized that he would be upon that age sooner rather than later as well. Nalced had rejected hundreds of women trying to make their way up to the palace gates to meet Euric through the years. Euric having a wife and children would ruin everything.

“Sir,” Nalced’s two personal guards said at once. They had been waiting at the bottom of the steps for him for hours.

“Hello, boys. What say we eat good tonight?” Nalced pulled out the coins from his pocket and cackled. His guards joined in. He stepped in the carriage and yelled to the driver. “To the pub!”

The child of a knight, Nalced had eaten well and lived comfortably, though he knew that the life of a foot soldier wasn’t for him. Nalced’s father had managed to impress enough important people to give Nalced a chance at being more important than he was. And he had certainly managed that feat.

*If my father could only see me now,* Nalced thought. *Or rather, tomorrow. After the coronation.*

Euric shivered as his carriage shook above the uneven road. Hial sat next to him and gazed straight ahead. It would be an hour or two before they reached Reistanbam, more if the snow persisted. Duke Selim was his cousin, but they seldom met. He hardly remembered what Selim even looked like.

The horses trailed on, their hooves imprinting the gathering snow beneath them. Daylight was all but gone now. “The driver will drop you off in Reistanbam, then bring me to Mayertran. Mas is my old friend, and I’m sure I can persuade her to have a second thought,” Hial stated.

“I can’t even believe myself now. Listening to a female politician and acting at the whim of a Duke and a Governor,” Euric scoffed.

Hial reached over with both her hands and grabbed Euric’s neck. He had no time to call for help. “Let’s be clear here,” Hial said, tightening her grip as Euric gagged. “I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing this for the country. You should be too.” Hial gripped his throat for a second longer then released and stared straight ahead as if nothing had happened. Euric knew he could have her executed, and so did she. Neither said a word to each other until Euric exited the carriage and headed up the steps to Reistanbam’s capital building.

Euric’s steps resonated through the silent city, which was softly illuminated with fading torches as the snow marched down from the Heavens in droves. The moon’s cycle had reached its climax, but its light was muffled by stubborn clouds.

Euric’s guards walked alongside him as he shivered. He stepped up onto the next marble stair but slipped. His aging body hit ice as he extended his arms. One of his guards bent down and offered a hand. “I'm *fine,*” Euric said. He began to stand up when his guard’s body fell on his. “I said I’m FINE,” Euric yelled. He turned over the guard to find an arrow firmly planted in the guard’s shoulder.

The other guard unsheathed his sword and pointed it in the direction the arrow came from. “Get behind me, sir,” the guard ordered. Euric obliged, crawling on the icy marble stairs to where his guard stood. His hands practically froze off as he sat motionless. A moment later, the guard’s body collapsed on top of his.

Euric clawed at the steps, trying to unearth himself from the guard’s mammoth frame. As he crawled, he suddenly felt a flash of pain in his right shoulder as hot liquid filled his garments, staining them scarlet. He picked himself up and threw himself over the railing beside the steps.

His body hit the hard ground, and Euric landed on his back, hearing a snap. *What a stupid way to die,* he thought. He couldn’t manage the thought of being killed by a lowly thug. He sighed. With a grunt, he flexed his abdomen as his left arm propped up his body. He looked over his shoulder, and beneath him sat the better part of an arrow.

He looked up, but only saw clouds with miniscule white specs raining down. Laying back on the ground, Euric let the gathering snow serve as his pillow as his eyelids became heavy. Within moments, he was asleep.

Hial strode out of Mayertran’s provincial capital with Mas in tow. Surrounded by imperial guards, they headed toward the waiting carriage. It was bright outside, almost noon. Mas had short, brunette hair cleanly cut a bit past her ears. She wore a white robe with a belt tied around her waist. She trudged along the hard ground wordlessly.

Hial walked up to the carriage and pushed the curtain aside. A guard stood inside and offered his hand. Hial took it and stepped up into the car. Nodding at him, she sat down and waited for Mas to step in. They sat across from each other with a guard sitting next to both. Mas scowled at Hial as the carriage lurched and the horses trailed away.

“Don’t give me that look,” Hial said flatly. “This situation was wholly avoidable.”

Mas didn’t flinch and her sharp gaze stared through Hial’s eyes. “You know I’m not wrong.”

“But I know you’re not right. The crown is what backs up your power,” Hial scolded. “Power is fragile, if you think about it. What makes someone powerful? Knights and manpower? A signed piece of paper?” A *proclamation?* Power was *loaned* to your father by Euric’s.”

“He never listens to what we have to say.”

“Who’s we?”

“The governors. Or anyone he puts in power, frankly,” Mas said.

“Well, he will. The governors and federal ministers are going to the banquet hall *tonight* to speak to the Emperor,” Hial informed. “You should have never split in the first place. The power you have is in *Renai.* If you break from Renai, then what power do you have?”

“I was doing *fine* on my own. If my source of power is in the country, then why didn’t we receive aid during the famine? Why did *I* have to get a loan from Rollostruss?”

“You got a loan from Rollostruss?!” Hial shouted. “All foreign interactions are to be managed by the Crown!”

“Then maybe he should have *managed* the issue before I did,” Mas shot back. Silence filled the carriage for the rest of the ride.

Euric awoke to the sound of hooves clapping on the stone-hard ground. “Good morning,” a voice said. “Wasn’t aware that I had royal company.”

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He was in a caravan lying across from Duke Selim. “Duke,” Euric stumbled, “I was just coming to speak with you.”

Selim grunted. “Before you ask, I’m taking you back to the capital. I want nothing to do with Renai any longer. Take my saving of your life as one final gesture of goodwill.”

Euric scowled but looked aside. The duke wore his official robe beneath an iron chest plate. His graying, neatly trimmed beard refracted the early sunlight that showed through into the car. Selim’s wavy red hair was topped with a modest crown.

“Well, would you look at that. In the city already. Tell your people to treat your shoulder wound. Mine have done the best they can.” Selim gestured out of the carriage. “It’s been a pleasure, your majesty.”

Euric, still flustered and carrying a bruised ego, sloppily exited, and stood on the snowy ground. The caravan he was inside was one of three in a row, all closely guarded. Behind him, footsteps approached.

“Not even going to say hello?” Euric glanced behind him and saw Hial with a triple guard.

“Minister, -” Euric started. Hial strolled past him without acknowledgment and walked up to the carriage Selim was in.

“Governor, it would be my pleasure to provide you room for the night.” After a few seconds of silence, Selim reluctantly stepped out and greeted Hial. Her glowing complexion was complemented by her wavy ginger hair that hung freely just shy of her shoulders.

“I’m grateful for the offer, Minister, but you must understand I’m not going to rejoin your empire. My people have had enough.”

“I didn’t *ask* if you wanted to discuss your decision.”

Glancing around at the growing number of royal guards gathering around the scene, Selim replied.

“It would be my honor to spend the night in the capital.”

Hial smiled and gestured for him to follow. They, along with Euric, walked past the palace gates followed by a small army of guards.

The gathering hall buzzed with staff bustling about with platters of food while the politicians and oligarchs made conversation. Elegant chandeliers lit the large room with a bright yellow glow while a large brick fireplace emitted heat in the center of the chamber. The walls were made of an expensive oak variant and the floors were crafted of polished cobblestone. Hial Fynna just hoped it would work. If things went as planned, tomorrow she would be Minister of Justice to a fully restored empire.

“Minister Fynna,” a rough voice greeting from her left. High General Nave Rettel walked toward her dressed in his full command outfit, which included a large brown shirt that drifted down to his knees and pants underneath. His oversize waist was defined by stark black belt, and he wore a golden chain around his neck. His bearded, balding head was plastered with a wide smile that showed the gaps in his tooth line.

“General,” Hial welcomed.

“What even is this thing anyway?” Nave grunted.

“The emperor decided to host an open forum to discuss the issues plaguing the nation and to address recent secession considerations,” Hial informed.

Nave snorted. “Well, I got some things to tell him!” With that, he strode away.

Hial spied Nalced Novorum, the Chief Minister, in the corner of the room. She made her way through the thick crowd and smiled. “Chieftain.” He wore a navy-blue robe embroidered with imported yellow linens at the neck, wrists, and at the bottom. His thick, brown hair was neatly combed over

“Ah, Minister Fynna! Pleasure to meet you here,” Novorum smiled.

“Surprised to see you just sitting here alone,” she said.

“Unfortunately, I do have to leave soon,” he replied. “But I’m sure you won’t need me anyway.”

“Of course I do,” Hial said. “You’re second in command of this country.”

“I have to,” he spat. “I promise you, it’s important.” With that, he turned and headed toward the double-doored exit. Beginning to lose patience, Hial forced herself to grin and she walked to where Duke Selim stood, chatting with the ministers of finance and defense. Both politely bid goodbye to the duke and strolled off at the sight of her.

“One last evening of unity, m?” Selim said.

“Not exactly what I was hoping for,” Hial replied.

“So,” Selim inquired, “where is our all-important emperor?”

Hial ignored the sarcasm. “He’s going to announce when supper starts. Then, we’ll act like a parliament with each guest getting two minutes of time to speak to the emperor about present concerns.”

Selim grunted. “*Concerns?* Perhaps I thought they were a bit more significant than that.”

“You know what I mean, Selim,” Hial sighed.

“I hope you know I’m done with Renai.”

“Then I hope you know Renai’s not done with you.” With that, Hial left Selim in silence.

“Minister Fynna.”

“Minister.”

“Madam Fynna.”

People greeted her as she wove her way through the giant mess of plutocrats and upper-class narcissists. Not that there was a difference. She entered a small room in the corner and smelled searing meat alongside frying vegetables. Plump cooks busied themselves with one thing or another as Hial watched.

“What’s our status?” Hial yelled to the head chef.

“We’re looking at ten minutes, ma’am.”

“Chop, chop,” Hial said, clapping her hands. “We want supper as swift as possible.”

“Ma’am, we’re-”

“AHHHHHH!” The chef was interrupted by screaming from the banquet chamber. Hial and the chef shoved the door open and analyzed the scene. Auburn flames licked up the walls as a mass of guests rushed to the exits. They were animals all vying for the exit, forcing their former friends away.

“Get out!” Hial shouted at the kitchen staff. They quickly moved out of the cramped room and into the chaotic dining hall. The chandelier dropped with a CLANG and the ceiling looked to be on the verge of collapse.

*Can one thing not go right?* Hial thought to herself. Grabbing a meat pounding mallet from the nearest counter, she sprinted to the nearest window and climbed onto its sill. The decorative stained glass came crashing down with one swing. Kicking loose glass out of the way, jumped through the narrow opening. “Hurry up, you fopdoodles!” she hollered. One by one, the cooks followed Hial out the window into the dusk.

Snow lightly fell, but it barely cushioned the obese body of the meat chef’s clumsy fall. Hial barely controlled her own collapse into the snow as she sobbed.

Nalced stood in his palatial office, staring through the ornate window at the gathering hall below. He smirked. *What a shame*, he thought. *I’ll bet they’ll never find the real culprit.*

Just then, a hard knock came at the spruce door behind him. “Enter,” he called, turning around. A scowling Hial entered and crossed her arms. “Minister,” he smiled.

“I’m done.” Hial stated.

“Excuse me?”

“With this administration. I know you’re planning a coup.”

“Minister, I-”

“*I know* you’re planning a coup. It’s clear as day. What’s also clear is Euric’s weakness. The country will lose its stability after word of this incident spreads. A *royal* *banquet hall* was burnt to the ground.”

“Your point?”

“*My point* is that I’ll help you. The only way Renai will survive is if Euric is removed and *replaced.*”

Nalced smiled. “Well, Minister, I believe I understand the terms of your proposition.”

“I retain my position.”

“Of course.”

“Well then,” Nalced said slyly, “let us formulate a plan.”

Euric rose from his throne and threw his half-eaten apple in the fire by his side. It missed and rolled onto the floor. “Clean that up,” Euric ordered.

“Yes, your majesty,” a nearby servant said.

“I’m retiring for the night. Don’t let Selim or Mas leave.”

“I believe they have, sire.”

Euric snorted. “Get them back,” he said, fatigued. He slowly climbed down the spiral staircase into his quarters below the throne room. Outside his chambers he saw two guards on duty. They both held metal staffs in their right hands and hit them against the floor simultaneously as Euric passed them and shut the thick door behind him. The last bit of light disappeared as it creaked closed. The windows were closed as well, but it didn’t matter as it was dusk anyway.

Euric felt the way to his bed slowly, but suddenly something grabbed his foot. He sprawled onto the hard ground. “Who’s there?”

No answer sounded but the hand continued to pull his foot under the bed. Now, he heard two other people in his chamber making their way toward him. “Guards!” he shouted. They must have heard, for pounding started on the door. Euric’s torso was now under the bed, but he grabbed the bedframe to avoid being pulled under anymore. “Guards!”

He felt another hand grasp his free foot and pull him harder. He kicked his feet, but the momentum only aided the other’s cause. Suddenly, a torch lit in the room.

“Now you don’t resist any further, your majesty,” a voice said. “Otherwise, this torch might happen to catch a few things on fire.” Euric’s right hand, still holding onto the bedframe, started to get hotter until he felt a harsh burning sensation on his fingers.

Abruptly, he lost feeling in his hand. But quickly gained it in his wrist. He watched as a freed hand hit the floor and stained the stone a deep scarlet. Euric screamed but still held on to the bedframe with his left hand. Starting to feel the warming sensation, Euric braced for an impact in his wrist. He saw the bloody axe swing toward his remaining hand before he felt the impact. Screaming louder now, Euric was now completely pulled under his bed and quickly out the other side. Before he could stand up, a thick grain sack was pulled over his head and body. Then, a precise blow with a wooden mallet hit him square in the head, knocking him out instantly.

Euric woke tied to a wooden chair with thick rope. He was in a small, circular room- probably in the basement- with one door, positioned directly in front of where he sat. The walls were all cobblestone and there were no windows. Two torches illuminated the chamber.

He looked down at his hands- or lack thereof- to see they had stopped bleeding and had started to scab over. He realized just then that the only leftmost part of his left hand had been shaved off by the axe. Three fingers and his thumb still remained, though the hand had still been significantly bloodied. Thinking quick, he felt for the knot in hopes of untying it.

Just then, the large door’s clunky knob turned, and the door slowly opened. Entered two guardsmen that took to each side of the doorway and stood at attention, ignoring his presence. Euric knew that only few seconds had passed, but it felt like an eternity before a robed figure entered. Euric recognized her gait, but no other defining features.

She wore a deep purple robe embroidered with red silk at the ends for the arms and legs. She stood in front of Euric and stared down for a few moments until her hands lifted to remove the oversize hood that concealed her face.

Euric gasped and a pain far greater than that of losing his hand filled his soul. “Hial?”

She stood motionless and spoke after a few moments of silence. “Now don’t go telling yourself that this was easy for me,” Hial said. “But it was what needed to be done.”

*“This?”* Euric said, looking down at his hands. “*This* needed to be done?”

Hial’s expression was sympathetic, but she didn’t waver in her confidence. “Your treatment was harsh,” she observed, “but nevertheless I stand with my actions.”

“Hial…”

“You could’ve been killed, you know,” Hial reminded. “*I* kept you alive. And *I’m* giving you a chance. Better to be a king in exile than a king in the grave.”

Euric stayed silent and looked away. “So where am I going?”

“Anywhere you choose,” Hial informed. “Just be gone by tomorrow.”

“Dead?” Nalced questioned.

“As William the second,” Hial replied as she walked into his office.

Nalced chuckled. “Beautiful.” He observed Hial’s uncertain face. “I hope you know that this country will be a lot better off now.”

“Of course,” Hial replied. “Perhaps I just… just need some sleep. It’s been a busy few days.”

Nalced nodded. “Goodnight then, Minister.” Without another word, Hial turned and exited the room, shutting the door behind her.

*I hope this won’t be a problem,* Nalced thought to himself. Then he laughed. *What’s it matter? She’ll be dead tomorrow!*

*Seven years,* Hial thought. *It had already been seven years.*

“You look deep in thought,” a voice said.

Hial looked up to find herself sitting across from Selim at a table. They were in a low-lit room surrounded by laughing townspeople drinking their fill of the best local beverages. It was loud, but Hial had long since learned to read lips.

“You look like you forgot where you were for a moment,” he said, laughing.

“Perhaps,” Hial said, letting out a soft chuckle.

“You can’t blame yourself, you know,” Selim said, switching his tone to a more serious one. “No one knew.”

*Knew what?* Hial thought angrily. *That Nalced burnt down the party house and then I trusted him? Or that his reign ended in civil war? That thousands would die fighting a war that had nothing to do with them? That all my friends were enemies, and all my enemies were friends?* Hial wanted to shout. To *scream.* She wanted to stand up, flip the table and yell at everyone in her vicinity. *But what would that do?* she rationalized.

Instead, she kept her face impassive and simply let out a noncommittal “I suppose.”

“After, all,” Selim said, lifting his large glass to his lips and guzzling down the last of his ale, “even with some good people, all governments collapse.”