

## Part I

### A Hero's Welcome

There are not many sights quite like Hylestus during celebration. The city itself has always been beautiful with its hanging gardens, pristine white stone work, and staggering size. But when there is something for the many people of Hylestus to celebrate they strive to add as much colour and life to the streets as they can.

It feels strange to Oberon marching an army into a city, while the people cheer and applaud. Being at the head of the formation, atop a jet black stallion, Oberon is even thrown laurels of purple and white flowers by the adoring crowd. It makes him flinch.

Only three weeks ago he rode into a city just as ancient as this one. But they showered him with curses, not adoration. That was the prize of conquest. When he was younger he had always believed what the stories had told him. Those of heroes who won glory and honour by fighting, by conquering. But through his adventure he had only seen death, and its many friends.

As the army continues to move deeper into the city another rider moves in closer to Oberon. He looks over to see a true Harkon, and not one of those frivolous girls native to this land. A woman with blood from his homeland, clad in glamorous plate armour, its silver catching the sunlight, and the eagle head helm staring unnervingly at him. Iya Vienna, pride of the Capitol, grand-daughter of the King. That's what she looked like now. Not the shy young girl Oberon once knew.

"You're sulking." Iya says bluntly.

"I'm not sulking." Oberon replies, not failing to hear the bitterness in his own voice. "It's just... Doesn't this feel odd to you? All these people, cheering for us."

Iya's eagle helm scans the group around, and she waved at a group of young recruits holding a large Vienna flag above their heads. "Maybe a little," she admits, "but this is what we've been fighting for right? Fame and glory?"

"Honour and glory." Oberon mutters.

"Oh yes, *Honour*. A word you Protivera's never seem to forget."

Oberon shoots Iya an irritated glare.

“Look, Oberon, I’m sorry.” Iya sighs, “I didn’t mean to offend. I just don’t like seeing you like this. All... restrained and quiet. You never used to act so reserved. You used to take pride in what you accomplished, not melancholy.”

“We haven’t accomplished anything, Iya. The rebels still fight us, the bandits still rule the south, the Anzeni still hold their borders against us, and the Sorvs...”

“Who cares about the Anzeni? Or the Sorvs for that matter?” Iya cuts in, “They keep to themselves. As for the rebels, we crushed them in the Deep Lands. They are nothing more than a wounded band of delinquents, rotting away in the deep, frigid south now.”

“And we’ll just allow them to lick their wounds, and grow their strength?” Oberon persists.

“They will be dead by the end of the year. Face it Oberon, you have no choice but to enjoy yourself. Nothing that isn’t worth celebrating.”

Oberon doesn’t respond, but looks up at the now looming walls of the White Towers. Three nights of drinking, feasting, and speeches awaits him in those towers. He feels a little sick just thinking about it.

Iya leans in closer, looking at Oberon's grey plate armour. She scoffs.

“What is it?” Oberon asks, a little self conscious.

“Is that the same suit you wore on the campaign?”

“Uh, yeah.” Oberon responds, “I did clean it up a bit before we arrived.”

Iya rolls her eyes and scowls.

“It’s barely even scratched. I had to get a new set delivered ahead of us.” She mutters, “You do have something to celebrate Oberon, so enjoy yourself. That’s an order.”

With a smile, Oberon nods, and Iya moves back to her place in rank.

The grand hall was even more decorated than the city below. Every brazier and torch burned with varying colours. Tables stand lined with golden platters, cups, and utensils. And banners the size of small vessels hang from the rafters, each one the colour of a united House. One hundred and sixteen, well, seventeen now. In fact the large green

and yellow banner of the Lipsine is being raised beside the throne as Oberon enters with the High Lords and Ladies of his campaign.

Noble men and women line the tables middle and back tables keeping the head tables, the ones closest to royalty, free for the returning victors. They stand and applaud, making the room shake like thunder. The High Lords beam and wave proudly. Iya is the only one other than Oberon to remain composed. They walk side by side to the bottom of the stairs, stopping just short of the High Table.

There the throne rests in front of a massive stained glass window, portraying the twelve High Gods, standing side by side in solidarity. On the throne sits the elderly Nero Vienna, King of the United Houses, Slayer of Tyrants, Protector of the People. He stands and claps softly. Beside him, his daughter, a slender, sharp faced woman named Myra rises inferiorly and gestures for the room to be silent.

“High Lords and Ladies.” Myra speaks, her voice ordered and calm, “Welcome home.”

The room erupts in another bout of cheers and applause. Myra smiles diplomatically but Oberon could see the annoyance in the corners of her face. Once the noise dies down again she continues.

“You fought bravely in the Deep Lands, and now you have returned home. Lady Iya, what news do you bring us?”

All eyes fall on the eagle helm as Iya finally removes it and places it under her arm.

“The rebels...” Iya calls, “Have been defeated!”

More cheers. More applause. More glory given for the bloodshed. Oberon had thought maybe, just maybe, that when the time came to return that the reward would be worth the price. But it all makes him feel hollow.

“The last of them have fled to Jaka,” Iya continues, “Where they will freeze, starve, and die in the snowy wastes. Our brave men and women have secured liberty for the Clans of the Forest. The Lipsine Council has accompanied me here, so that they may thank Your Grace, in person.”

Eyes turn now to the small Ver dressed in green robes, standing with humility behind Iya.

“And it is a pleasure to see them once again.” Nero beams, “Durule, how are you my old friend?”

“I am well, Your Grace.” replies the head of the Lipsine Council. A short, long bearded Ver, with a glistening emerald gaze. There is no white of his eyes, like all Ver, the look has always unsettled Oberon. “The rebels caused much damage to me and my people, they took up positions in our ancient homes and temples. They threatened our leaders with violence, and strong-armed our people into doing their bidding. But, your army was mighty, and the traitors were no match for their blades.”

Another round of obnoxious applause as the King salutes the Ver dutifully, who bows deeply in turn. Do these people not know? Oberon wonders. No, how could they. All they hear is what they are told. The rebels weren’t crushed by the army, they nearly destroyed it. But that must be known. An army leaves three thousand strong, and returns with two thirds the number. Surely that won’t be ignored.

“Lady Iya of House Vienna.” Myra calls over the chatter, “You were charged with carrying out your first mission as head of an army. You were successful.” The King glanced at Myra, who drew in a breath, “You led with supremacy and won a grand victory over our enemies. For this you will be promoted to Commander of the Royal Infantry.”

With much more ovation Iya, now down on one knee, salutes with a closed fist to her chest, before rising and bowing to the King.

“As Commander you will join the High Lords and Ladies, and their generals, in the war camps on the southern front. With your skill and expertise it is the court’s hope that your presence will inspire the troops and that you will help lead them to yet another victory.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Thank you, High Lady.” Iya says. And Oberon knows, by the sound of her voice, that she is hurt by this. He had thought that, despite that horror of war, Iya would be elated by a promotion like this. It is everything that she had ever worked for. But he can see it in her eyes as she takes her place at the King’s table. She is angry. Oberon stares at her as the other High Lords and Ladies of his party receive their praises, until a voice snaps him back.

“Lord Protivera?” Myra asks wryly.

“Yes, uh, High Lady Vienna.” Oberon stammers as a light chuckle rises from the nobles, “Sorry, I’m a bit weary from the journey.”

“So it seems.” Myra replies, “We heard from reports that you fought honourably against the rebels.”

A silence fills the room for a little too long before Oberon realises he needs to respond.

“I suppose so.” Oberon says flatly

Myra raises an eyebrow. “Is that modesty, young Protivera? Do you not agree that our fight against the rebels is honourable and just?”

Oberon glances around the hall, his eyes falling on a rugged, scarred man sitting at the High Table. Neatly trimmed, and dressed in a pristine red uniform, Oberon’s father looks as imperious as ever. Lord Protector Galeedeus Protivera nods at Oberon, his eyes piercing.

“Of course, High Lady.” Oberon calls with more flare, “But the rebels were no mightier than common bandits. Defeating them was nothing compared to the honour gained by freeing our lands from the tyrant Luxiverans. An honour our King so righteously claimed for our glory.”

That is clearly a much more appropriate response, as the polite clapping from the assembled nobles confirms. Myra smiles, and Oberon thinks he notices a knowing look in her eyes. That unsettles him. But, the King salutes in appreciation and Oberon bows as he was taught so well to do.

“Wise words, Lord Protivera.” Myra drones, “And as a reward for your efforts you shall be commended. A knighthood, and a permanent place in the Royal Army, where you can continue to excel in your art. Congratulations.”

Oberon almost forgets to respond as the words wash over him. It’s then that he understands what Iya was feeling. A knighthood was all he had ever wanted when he was younger. But now, with the promise that the horrors of war will continue for the foreseeable future, he feels nothing but dread.

“Thank you, High Lady Vienna.” Oberon quickly answers, sounding as proud as he can manage, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Oberon bows again, and takes his seat at his company's table.

He was the last to be addressed. So after he is seated, and the last of the applause dies away, Nero stands to make some remarks on the continuing conflicts in the south, the promise of a better future through unity, and some other drizzle that Oberon fails to hear as he sinks further into his thoughts.

Galeedeus didn't say anything to Oberon over the course of the feast, only telling him in a brisk, emotionless tone. “The family will gather tomorrow morning after the morning meal. Attend us.” And with that he rises and leaves the hall, a little earlier than would be considered polite.

Oberon leaves after the King excuses himself, but not after the festivities end. Many call his name, old faces he knew for his homelands in Harkon, and new faces from Nuarivera wishing to make more powerful friends alike. Damn mouthbreathers. Oberon doesn't stop for any of them, he is done with the attention. All he wants is to get out of his armour and go to bed.

Oberon pushes through the last of the crowds and begins his march down the corridor, but before he makes it ten metres an gauntleted hand grabs his arm. He turns to see Iya, red faced from wine and smiling broadly.

“Leaving so soon?” she asks with a childish giggle Oberon hasn't heard in ages. She shakes the bottle of wine, “The party has only just started.”

“I'm tired, Iya. I'm going to bed.” he grumbles.

“Tired? I have seen you march for sixteen hours straight without stopping even when ordered to. I think you can handle an hour of being social.” she remarks.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” Oberon says bluntly.

“Shouldn't I be?” Iya asks, her smile falling to a furrowed brow.

Oberon doesn't know what exactly to say, so he just shrugs.

“Well, I am in a good mood and your brooding is bumming me out. So I think you should have some wine, and join the party. Or, if the cityfolk are making you sick we could walk the gardens?” Iya places her bottle of wine in his hand.

“I don’t drink, Iya.” Oberon grunts, pushing the wine back into her hands.

Iya raises an eyebrow, a sly smile on her lips. “Really? Have you forgotten our time as recruits? I recall you being far more fun back then. What changed, Oberon?”

Oberon knuckles turn white at Iya’s cheery attitude. Not that he wants her to be upset, but he knows what he saw in that hall, and he doesn’t like the dishonesty of her happiness. He looks around the hallway to assure there was nobody who could overhear them. “What changed with you?. I saw you up there, Iya. When High Lady Myra promoted you, you looked crushed. Like you hadn’t just had your dream come true. A Commander? Leading real soldiers? That’s what you have always wanted, yet when she said those words you looked like you’d rather be anywhere else.”

Iya rolls her eyes.

“You weren’t looking properly then. I am very proud of what I have achieved, and honoured by the approaching Anointment.” she states, not very convincingly.

“Oh come on, Iya, I know what I saw,” Oberon groans, “And I know you. You don’t want this.”

Iya stares daggers at Oberon, all humour gone. She stands there shaking, her fist clenched so hard around the bottle of wine Oberon’s worried it will shatter.

“You clearly don’t know me, Oberon.” Iya growls.

The two of them glare at each other for a long moment. Then, Iya turns on her heels and storms back into the hall. Oberon watches her leave, and continues to stare at the heavy wooden doors that she shut behind her. Feeling the heavy weight on his chest pushing down harder than before, he leaves to get some sleep.