

XIII

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LITINA

the Sword Princess

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ALTINA

the Sword Princess

XII



The young woman threw herself at him,
hugging him with all her might.
And in her tight embrace...
Regis let out a croak like the death throes
of a crushed frog.



“Regis! Regis! Regis!
Regis! Regis!
Regis!”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis



New Emperor of Belgaria
Latrielle

Even if the heavens disapprove, I am now the emperor. I shall be the serpent that swallows nations whole!

“The Belgarian Empire is the only superpower that belongs in these lands! With no enemies left to fight, I promise you eternal peace and prosperity. Follow me! And then, I shall give you victory!”



Detachment Commander

Marion

“Huh?
W-Well...
I intend to
give it my all!
That’s what
we’ve all
decided!”

“Major General
Jerome Jean
de Beilschmidt.
Think before you
answer this—do you
seriously intend
to survive?”

Black Knight

Jerome

ALTEA

the Sw... princess





Characters

Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is.

She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick



Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophile who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eric Mickaël de Blanchard

A Belgian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénezay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt

Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.



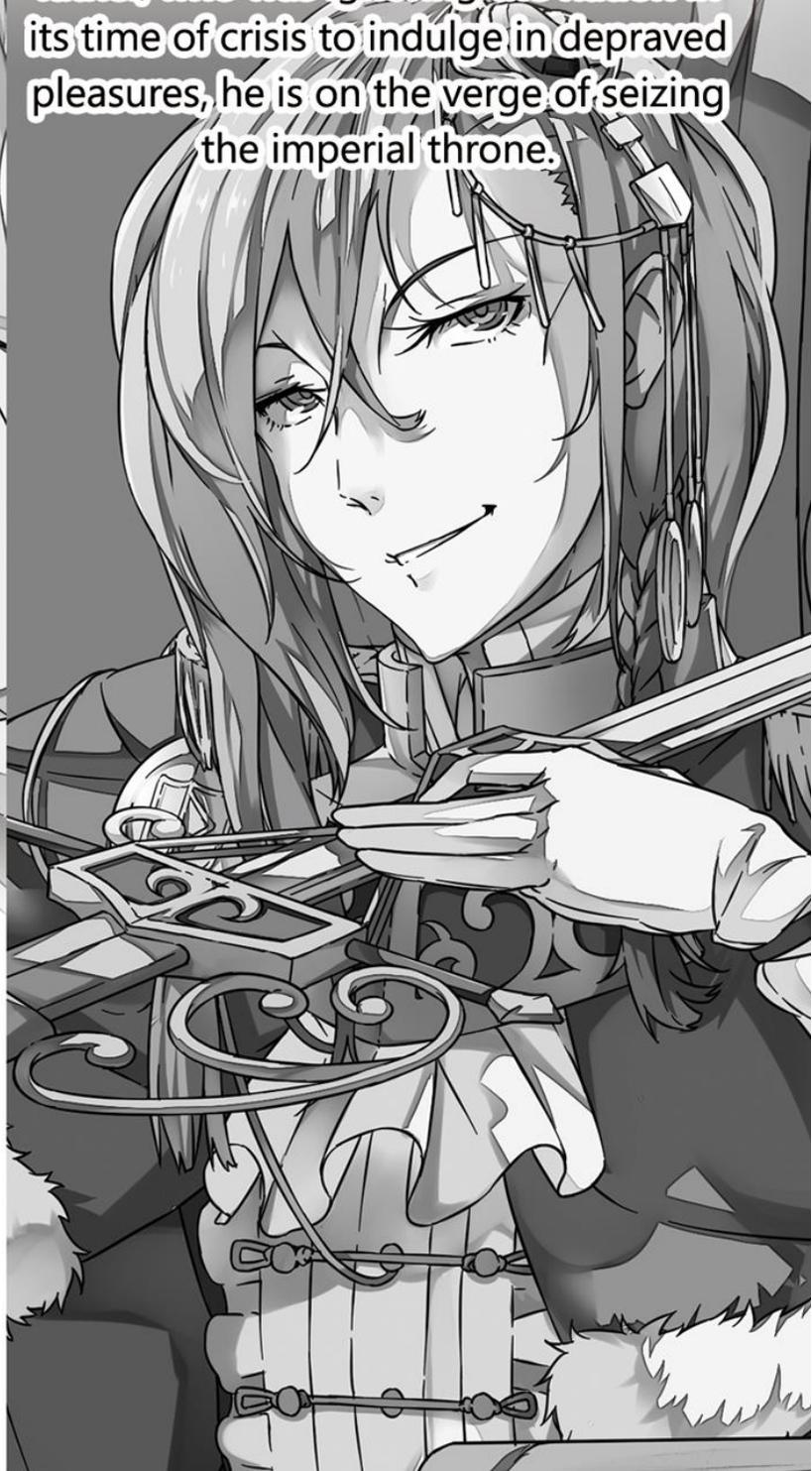


Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire and son of the empress consort. He possesses talent in both civil and military affairs. After murdering his father, who was ignoring the nation in its time of crisis to indulge in depraved pleasures, he is on the verge of seizing the imperial throne.





M E R

High
Britannia

Grand Duchy of Varden

Langobarti

Fort Volks

Grebeauvoir

Fort Sierck

70Li

15Li

100Li

Theonveil

Verseilles

Estaburg

Fort Boneire

Belgarian
Empire

Hispania



The story so far—

In the Belgarian Empire, there lives a girl named Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—who happens to be the fourth in line to the imperial throne. She is a princess who, at a mere fourteen years of age, resolved to fix the corruption plaguing her nation.

“I’m going to become empress,” she tells Regis Aurick. “I need your wisdom.”

Now, Regis is inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves. He is a hopeless soldier by all definitions who spends his days buried in books, yet she still enlists him to be her tactician.

Through a duel with the hero Jerome, a battle against barbarians, and the capture of the impregnable Fort Volks, Altina steadily raises a formidable military force.

Conscious of the fourth princess’s achievements, Latrielle invites her to the capital to join the celebration commemorating the founding of the nation. But as the Belgarian Empire shakes under the weight of a vicious power struggle, High Britannia declares an all-out war.

Coinciding with this sudden invasion, the Grand Duchy of Varden launches an attack on Fort Volks. Regis’s scheme sends them running in a single night, however, and a month later, he finds himself assisting the Seventh Army’s retreat in the Battle of La Frenge.

Regis then manages to defy the odds on the western front. Serving as admiral proxy, he leads the Western Liberation Fleet to a swift victory, managing to take out the enemy fleet. From there, he immediately leads the Empire’s Fourth Army to rout the last supply shipment under the protection of the infamous Mercenary King.

And so, the Belgarian Army puts a stop to the High Britannian invasion. Latrielle returns to the imperial palace to deliver the news, but the behavior he witnesses is completely unbecoming of a nation-threatening crisis. The emperor spends his time indulging in pleasures, and upon seeing him succumb to such depravity, the prince's anger finally reaches breaking point. His hand moves to his treasured sword, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*...

The cause of the emperor's death is of course falsified: he is announced to have died of old age.

The fleeing High Britannian Army joins forces with the Kingdom of Langobarti, and together they capture the fortified city of Grebeauvoir to the north. At Latrielle's request, Regis joins the First Army in its campaign to recapture the stolen territory.

With full command of the Empire's strongest troops, Regis manages to turn the city's geographic advantages against it. High Britannia's commanding officer, Oswald, is defeated, and Queen Margaret is taken prisoner.

The war finally comes to an end, and the Empire is victorious...but Latrielle now knows just how much of a threat Regis's wisdom poses to his reign. It is with this knowledge that he makes a solemn declaration:

"Kill Regis d'Aurick."

Now on the run from the Empire's First Army, Regis makes a deal with Jessica, tactician of the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu. After entering the capital in disguise, he follows a lead from Carol, a humble bookstore owner, which leads him to Claude, a revolutionary journalist, and then to Bourguine, an infamous activist. Finally, Regis finds himself in the company of Bastian, third prince of the Empire.

“Those who support hegemonic conquest do not truly understand this new era,” the tactician explains. “No matter how many battles they might win, they will rule only over a land of corpses.”

In an attempt to cast a shadow over Latrielle’s coronation, Regis abducts Grand Chamberlain Beclard from his manor. After obtaining the marquis’s testimony, *The Weekly Quarry* runs an issue exposing the truth of the late emperor’s demise.

As this operation continues, Altina, unable to accept word of Regis’s death, appears at Versailles with the Fourth Army in tow.

Preface: With Undue Haste

Imperial Year 851, August 12th, evening—

The Fourth Army set up camp on the eastern hill, numbering five hundred cavalry and four thousand foot soldiers. The First Army surpassed them in numbers, equipment, and training...but the Fourth Army's achievements in the war against High Britannia were known to every citizen of the Belgarian Empire.

There was but a single day left before Latrielle became the new emperor, and a tense, unsettling air enveloped the imperial capital of Verseilles.

“What shall we do, Princess?” the sharpshooter Eric asked.

Altina was standing at the top of the hill, glaring down at the First Army that had marched out to meet them. “We charge!” she declared.



“Huh?!”

“Just kidding! Regis would surely be against a move like that. In fact, he’d most likely do everything in his power to stop me.”

“Of course he would... It’s reckless to take on the First Army. To start with, what justification are you going to give?”

“See how their armies are lined up like that? There’s definitely something fishy afoot.”

“We’re the ones who led an army here...”

“Then I’m going to speak to Latrielle alone!”

“Don’t!” Eric shrilled despite himself. “Um... I find that quite ill-advised, Princess. It seems that Latrielle will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. To go out there would be to put your head in the lion’s mouth.”

“I know.”

As they continued their conversation, two men walked up from the troop headquarters. The first was Eddie, who was recognized as the Empire’s Sword, and the second was Abidal-Evra, captain of the Flying Swallow Knights. Altina had intended for the former to remain at Fort Volks, but he had given his own thoughts on the matter and then joined anyway, leading the foot soldiers who had trailed along behind the vanguard.

“Hey!” Eddie casually raised a hand. “How long are you going to stare at them like that, Argentina?”

“We were just talking about that. Eric’s saying I shouldn’t go and speak with them on my own.”

“Isn’t that obvious? What are we supposed to do if our general suddenly disappears? I reckon this calls for an envoy or something.”

Altina's eyes widened. "I'm shocked. I didn't know you could make so much sense, Eddie!"

"I do have *some* battlefield experience, after all... Wait. Did you just casually insult me?"

Abidal-Evra lowered his head. "My apologies. We had eight days from the fort to the capital. We should have discussed our countermeasures then."

"Erk..." Altina faltered; she could tell that she was being asked why she hadn't come up with a plan sooner. "Didn't we agree to retaliate when Latrielle attacks us?"

"They're not going to charge at us out of nowhere," Eric noted with a sigh.

Eddie nodded. "Yeah, with civil wars, there's a lot more glaring than there is actual fighting."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" Altina asked, her lips pursed. "I've never been in a civil war before."

"Neither have I," Eric said, speaking with the utmost caution. He clearly viewed Altina's actions as hasty, but he was a mere guard—he was in no position to object to his commander's decisions. It wasn't as though he could come out with any brilliant ideas as Regis could...

After that thought occurred to him, Eric could say no more. At times like this, it was Regis who usually brought everything back on track. Without him, their conversation wandered like a wild horse without a rider—that is, until Eddie spoke up again.

"In any case, I think you should send an envoy."

"That sounds wise. Then, say I do send one... Who do you think is best suited for the job?" Altina asked. She scanned the faces of all those gathered, pressing them for an opinion.

Eddie stepped back. “Not me. I know it was Regis’s plan back then, but Prince Latrielle probably holds a personal grudge against me.”

“Right, I remember. Latrielle did see you flee the palace with Auguste in your loving embrace.”

“I... Well, pretty much.” The current First Prince Auguste was actually Fifth Princess Felicia in disguise, so Eddie couldn’t help but see Altina’s explanation as somewhat inaccurate. It mattered not, however—Auguste’s true identity was a secret being kept even from the army’s officers, Abidal-Evra included. The only reason Eric knew was because he had managed to see through the princess’s facade.

Putting that issue aside, Eric brought up another point. “We also need to consider that, if we send Eddie, one of the best swordsmen in the Empire, they might assume he’s there for a duel rather than to deliver a message.”

Eddie shook his head. “I don’t cut people, you know.” He hated blood and didn’t want to kill...although he also didn’t want to *be* killed. That was why he had honed his skills to an overwhelming degree, to ensure he could survive while not having to take any lives. It was a goal that was possible only with his God-given talent and the *Défendre Sept*.

Altina folded her arms in protest. “I’d never send Eddie to fight one-on-one!”

“No, of course not,” Eric said. “I’m just saying that Latrielle’s side might misunderstand our intentions...”

“If they want a duel, I’ll very well go myself!”

“Are you crazy?!” Eric exclaimed. He knew that criticizing one’s commander in such a fashion wasn’t befitting of a guard, but he couldn’t contain himself.

Upon hearing Eric's response, Altina quickly waved off the proclamation she had just made. "N-No, I get it. I've grown. I'm not going to start a civil war without just cause."

"Please consider this seriously. The sun's about to set."

"Who do you think I should send, Eric?"

"If you give the order...I'll go."

"That's even crazier," Eddie refuted. "Are you really suggesting that a guard abandon their escort?"

"I—"

"And you're Altina's favorite, right? We need to consider the chance that the First Army might kill our messenger. We shouldn't send someone whose death would make our commander lose her cool."

"Favorite?!"

"I see you with Argentina and Clarisse all the time. You're practically another maid to her."

"I-I'm a man!"

Eddie chuckled. "I get that, but...you know."

"P-Please, say no more, Sir Eddie."

Please don't out me on a hunch... Eric thought as he broke into a cold sweat.

Altina cocked her head. "Hmm. If we do send someone, what do we say to Latrielle? We could ask him whether he's responsible for Regis's death, but what if he says he isn't?"

"Then maybe he really isn't," Eddie replied with a shrug.

"That's nonsense."

"Then what are you going to do, Argentina? Are you going to conclude it's a lie before you hear the facts?"

“Um...” Altina fell into thought. She had led an army all the way to the capital on impulse; at no point had she thought about how she would get the answers she needed out of the second prince.

Eric put his head in his hands. “Aah, this is precisely the sort of thing we need Regis for...”

“If only we had him here! How am I supposed to believe he’s really dead based on a single scrap of paper?!”

“Right...”

“You sure don’t come across a tactician like him every day,” Eddie sighed. “Saved the Empire, he did. So why’d you do it, Latrielle...?”

The Empire had sieged Grebeauvoir and come out victorious. There were no reports of the First Army’s strategic headquarters having been attacked, so the only way a staff officer like Regis could have died in battle was if he had been murdered.

“Hm?” All of a sudden, Abidal-Evra pointed north. “Foot soldiers coming from the flank. Is it a surprise attack?!”

“What?!”

Altina hurriedly turned. Just as Abidal-Evra had said, a unit had broken away from the First Army, raising a cloud of dust in its wake. There looked to be around seven hundred soldiers in total—not too many, but enough that they couldn’t be ignored. The Fourth Army would fall into disorder if they were flanked, and their annihilation was inevitable if the First Army used that opportunity to charge. But at the same time, the princess couldn’t risk sending too many troops to the rank—doing so would thin out her front line to a dangerous degree.

Altina racked her brain for a moment before she declared, “Send seven hundred foot soldiers to meet them!”

“You’d match their numbers?!” Abidal-Evra exclaimed. “Princess, if our flank is breached, our army will collapse!”

“...Then send out double their number!”

“One thousand four hundred troops, then. Very well. We’ll extract four hundred from the front!”

“Good!”

“Wait a sec!” Eddie raised his voice. “Doesn’t look like an attack to me.”

“Eh?”

On closer inspection, the unit headed for them was waving a white flag. They were either surrendering or they came in peace.

“What could this mean?” Eric asked, sounding quite perplexed. “It’s hard to imagine they sent seven hundred messengers.”

“And don’t they kinda look like mercenaries?” Eddie muttered, his eyes abnormally keen.

As the approaching soldiers came closer, Altina was also able to make out their equipment. Their weapons and armor were completely mismatched; they certainly didn’t look like soldiers of the Empire.

“They definitely give off that...mercenary feel.”

“Then we can’t let our guard down,” Abidal-Evra said, “even if they are flying a white flag.”

There were plenty of mercenaries who were little better than brigands. Attacking under a white flag or pretending to be wounded were considered taboo strategies on the battlefield, but such men were more than willing to stoop to such lows. They were, after all, bands of criminals rather than soldiers.

“That’s not it...” Altina concluded. Even she couldn’t pinpoint the reason for her certainty; there was just something about the billowing white flag that felt...familiar. “Is that Regis?”

There came exclamations of surprise from all around. Little did the soldiers know, it was about to be confirmed that Altina’s intuition was correct.

Chapter 1: Thunderclap

Four hours prior—

Regis was feeling blessed. Early in the morning on August 12th, the newspaper containing Beclard's testimony had gone into circulation. The capital was now in an uproar over these allegations that had come right before the prince's coronation. The public pressed the palace for answers, but none were provided. It was all going as he had predicted.

Sipping coffee in the café space of Carol's bookstore, Regis was finally able to devote his time to reading. The letter he had written was en route to Fort Volks: an encoded message that would inform the princess of his survival and which included a proposal for their next plan of action. It would take a few days for the letter to arrive and for him to receive a response; in the meantime, he could enjoy the peace and tranquility of a short respite...

"Regis!"

Or so he thought. Fanrine had rushed over to him, concerningly pale-faced.

"Wait. You can't call me that out loud," Regis said. "That's a little problematic."

"Aah! I'm sorry! *Regina!* Big trouble!"

Regis was still cross-dressing to remain hidden in the capital. There was no real need for him to remain in the city, but he did so anyway, immersed in books in the name of gathering information. Cross-dressing was of very little consequence to him now that it was affording him time to read.

"What's wrong?" Regis asked. "There's hardly anything in the world serious enough to warrant yelling in a bookstore."

“Princess Argentina’s knights have set up formation on the eastern hill!”

“Whaaat?!”



Much to his disappointment, Regis's peace had lasted not even half a day. He hurriedly made his way back to the Renard Pendu camp. Third Prince Bastian, his friend Elize, the activist Bourgine, the journalist Claude, the injured Franziska, and her little sister Martina all remained in the capital.

No sooner had Regis arrived than Jessica, the interim leader of the mercenary brigade, fixed him with a stern glare. Her features were pretty enough, but she still exuded an unmistakable intensity. "You are back rather late, Sir Aurick. It is almost sunset," she said.

"U-Um, I believe I sent a letter regarding my situation. Did it not reach you?"

"You were reading, I presume."

"Urk..."

Regis and Jessica hadn't known one another for long, but she had already seen right through him. Perhaps that much was to be expected; she wasn't known as "the Magician" for nothing. As far as Regis was concerned, her insight greatly surpassed his own.

Jessica had already spread out a map before them. "There are five hundred cavalry atop the hill and four thousand foot soldiers behind," she began. "The White Hares of the First Army are taking formation at the base of the hill."

"I saw them mustering the soldiers on my way out of the city. The First Army will send approximately ten thousand. In fact, they may have already headed out by now; we left from the opposite side of the city and took a detour to get here."

"Is your Princess Argentina planning on waging civil war?"

"She can't be..."

"This is your fault, you know."

“Mn... I sent a letter, but if she’s here already, she must have missed it.”

“So, what are you going to do? Will you sit and watch?”

“Heavens, no! I’m going to meet with the princess.”

Jessica nodded, having anticipated that response. “You have my cooperation, as promised,” she said.

The mercenaries had already made all the necessary preparations and were ready to move at a moment’s notice. Regis had expected to head out alone, but he was open to any assistance.

Upon leaving the camp, the brigade made for the eastern hill, numbering around seven hundred in total. Regis accompanied them in a rattling box carriage, together with Fanrine and Jessica. As per usual, he was unable to ride a horse.

“The Fourth Army’s in sight!” the driver called out.

“What now, Sir Aurick?” Jessica asked.

“Please raise a white flag! We’ll spur an attack if we press on like this!”

“Understood!”

Fortunately, the First Army hadn’t made any moves. Regis was able to reach the Fourth Army without incident...although whether he was completely out of the woods was yet to be seen.

As the soldiers of the Fourth Army readied their bows and spears, cautiously eyeing the unfamiliar band of mercenaries, Regis climbed out of the carriage. He recognized a few of the gathered troops. Once they recognized him in turn, they would surely call Altina.

Regis waved at the wary men with a smile, but their response was not what he had expected. Rather than return the gesture, their

cheeks flushed with embarrassment. Were they not soldiers of the Fourth Army?

Upon his arrival, Regis had thought he was finally back where he belonged...but something didn't seem quite right. He was starting to feel as though he had inadvertently wandered into someone else's house.

Understanding the situation, Fanrine came up behind the tactician and whispered in his ear, "Regis! Your clothes!"

"Ah?!"

He had completely forgotten—as he was now, he looked nothing like the tactician they all knew. He was disguised so perfectly that even the observant journalists had been unable to tell he was a man.

But what will the soldiers think if they see me take off my wig...?

As Regis mused over his situation, the soldiers of the Fourth Army parted to reveal a figure with fiery red hair, carrying over her shoulder a sword that was longer than she was tall. Her crimson eyes stared straight at him.

"Regis...?"

"Huh? A-Altina!"

"Regis, Regis, Regis, Regis, Regis, Regis!"

The young woman threw herself at him, hugging him with all her might. And in her tight embrace...

"Gweh."

...Regis let out a croak like the death throes of a crushed frog.



Inside the Fourth Army's main camp, six people sat gathered in a tent: Regis, Altina, Eddie, Abidal-Evra, Jessica, and Fanrine. Eric kept watch over the entrance.

Once Altina had gotten over the excitement of their reunion, she stared long and hard at Regis. It wasn't the first glare he had received from a woman since waking up that morning. Today was evidently one of those days.

"So? What's going on?" Altina asked. "Why did you appear as a woman with enemy mercenaries after Latrielle reported that you had died in battle? Ah, I just don't know anymore!"

"I'm as puzzled as you are..."

Regis couldn't blame Altina for being confused. As he looked at her, he could feel his cheeks naturally loosening into a smile.

"What are you grinning for?!" Altina demanded.

"Me? Am I grinning? I didn't notice..."

"Is it that amusing to see me at a loss for words?"

"No, I'm just happy that I get to see you at all."

"Wha—?!" Altina's cheeks burned red.

Eddie burst into laughter. "Real smooth! I'll need to use that one myself when I'm back at Fort Volks," he said. His beloved, Fifth Princess Felicia, had remained behind.

"Oh, no. No, no, no," Regis stammered, starting to panic. "That's not what I meant!"

"You're more silver-tongued than ever now that you're a woman, Regis."

"Don't even joke about that, Sir Eddie."

“Do you really have time for such bantering?” a voice interjected. It was Jessica, speaking as coolly and as calmly as ever. “The sun is already setting. Will you prolong this staring match?”

Regis offered a wry smile. “No, there really is no reason for us to keep this up. Let’s have the soldiers sleep somewhere warm tonight. Could someone fetch me a pen and paper?”

No sooner had the words been spoken than a maid entered the tent. In her hands was a tray, on top of which was a writing set. Her response had come so immediately that it was as though she had predicted the request.

“Oh...” Regis swallowed his breath.

Clarisse set the tray on the table without so much as a word. Because there were others present, she opted to remain silent and expressionless, but Regis noticed a slight redness to her eyes. She had no doubt been crying.



“Thank you, Ms. Clarisse,” Regis said with a smile. “I’m, um... I’m back.”

“Of course. Welcome back...” She paused for a moment and then, in a voice that was barely loud enough to be audible, added, “Mr. Regis.”

With that, Clarisse bowed and exited the tent as if nothing had happened.

“She could have at least said a little more,” Altina murmured. “Especially considering how long you’ve been gone for.”

“...It’s fine,” Regis replied. As far as he was concerned, Clarisse had conveyed her joy at his safe return better than she could have in ten thousand words.

Regis picked up the pen that Clarisse had prepared for him and noticed that it fit perfectly in his hand. It was the pen he always used—the one he had left behind at Fort Volks. Clarisse must have believed in him, even though the troops had marched on the news of his death. She had known that he would have an opportunity to use it once again.

Or perhaps she intended to lay it on my grave... he noted to himself as his pen flew across the page. He then rolled up the letter he had written and pressed Altina’s seal into the wax.

“You use the princess’s seal as if doing so comes naturally to you,” Jessica chided him again.

“Yes, well... You see... Altina fails to seal these letters properly one out of every three times.”

“You even call her by a nickname.”

“I wouldn’t want you to misunderstand, but...”

Regis had called her “Altina” before everyone gathered. He didn’t want any rumors spreading among the soldiers and endeavored to

speaking courteously in public, but now that it had come to this, he decided that he would reveal their relationship to the Fourth Army's officers.

"I am Altina's tactician, nothing more and nothing less," Regis continued. "It's just, the princess and I are both terrible with needless formalities."

"Actually, I've grown quite accustomed to formal speech by now."

"H-Huh?" Regis was completely taken aback; that refutation had come from the very last person he had expected.

"I continue to permit such casual speech because it's you, Regis," Altina explained.

"W-Well...thanks."

"I reached out to you as a tactician. But more than that, I wanted a comrade who shares my ambitions."

"...Yes, that is my intention. We strive toward the same ideals."

Jessica nodded. "I understand that you share a special bond."

"It's...somewhat hard to explain," Regis said.

"Fear not. At the very least, I could tell at first glance that your relationship is not a romantic one."

"I-Is it really that obvious?"

"Do you not know who I am?" Jessica asked. Her observational skills were entirely to be expected of the esteemed tactician of such an infamous mercenary brigade.

"Hmm..." Abidal-Evra furrowed his brow. "I don't think anyone would deny that Sir Aurick is an extraordinary talent, but this complete disregard of decorum is..."

Eddie cut him off with a reassuring pat on the back. “Now, now! They’ll act all proper during ceremonies and official business.”

“A military meeting *is* official business.”

“Well, what does it matter if Argentina’s asking for it? Keeping things casual makes it easier for us to work, and right now, results are more important than decorum.”

“C-Certainly...”

Now more than ever, they needed to allow Regis to freely exhibit his talents. The very future of the Fourth Army was at stake.

Regis lowered his head. “Sorry. It’s all my fault.”

Abidal-Evra frowned. “Oh, er... I can understand the reason you don’t speak formally around the princess, so...please be at ease around me too. It would make me feel irreverent otherwise.”

“Ah... Aha ha...” Regis gave an awkward chuckle. “I will do my utmost... I mean, I’ll do my best.”

“So, what about the letter?” Altina asked Regis, pulling the conversation back on track. Now that he thought about it, he had explained only that he intended to give the soldiers a warm place to sleep.

“It will be delivered to Latrielle, of course.”

“You’re sending an envoy, right? I was able to work out that much, but I was hesitating over who to send.”

“Hmm? It doesn’t matter who.”

“Really?!”

“The First Army is stationed close enough that you could even send a fresh recruit.”

“What are you going to ask Latrielle?” Altina asked. “About whether he put you to the sword? Ah, no... I suppose he couldn’t have.”

It was hard to believe that the second prince had asked for Regis’s assassination when Regis was in their very presence and clearly still alive.

Regis smiled bitterly. “Oh, he did—or at least, he tried to. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have spread the news that I died in battle.”

“Ah, that’s right!”

“But we can put that matter aside for now. First, about the envoy. At this distance, we just need to have someone deliver our message. Latrielle can reply with a letter in turn.”

“I see.”

“Again, I’m sorry. This was my mistake. I should have appointed someone knowledgeable about these things as your deputy officer. Sir Everard would have done nicely.”

“Oh, of course...”

Everard was currently serving as the head of the Fort Volks garrison, but he was a veteran warrior. He was Jerome’s trusted retainer and was likely well versed when it came to negotiating.

Regardless, they couldn’t just sit around talking. Regis called a runner, entrusted him with the document he had written, and then sent him to the First Army.

Altina cocked her head. “So, what did you write?”

“Wait. Didn’t I show you before I sealed it?”

“Aha ha... Sorry. I was staring at you the whole time, Regis.”

Upon hearing that, Regis felt his cheeks grow heated. “I-I see...”

“I was just making sure you weren’t transparent.”

“Transparent? I’m not a ghost.”

Altina and Eddie chuckled at that remark.

Abidal-Evra seemed restless; he was no doubt still unaccustomed to this casual atmosphere. Jessica, in contrast, seemed a lot more composed. She must have already had a good idea of what the letter was about, as she sipped her tea without paying it much mind.

Eric remained as steadfast as a guard should be, so it was up to Fanrine, who was seated at the foot of the table, to ask the pressing question. She raised her hand to get everyone’s attention and then said, “I’m curious about it as well. What did you put in the letter?”

“Er... First, I wrote about myself—that there were certain reasons that caused my disappearance from the battlefield. I also apologized for troubling the marshal general on the matter and added that I had safely returned to the Fourth Army.”

“You didn’t address the fact that you’ve been pronounced dead...?”

“Regardless of whether we offer our opinion on the situation, Latrielle will apologize and issue a correction. It does happen from time to time that someone declared dead is discovered to actually be alive.”

“But Latrielle plotted to assassinate you.”

“We have no evidence to prove that.”

More importantly, if they prompted further investigation into the matter, it would come to light that Renard Pendu had killed the lookouts. Nothing good would come from prodding that sleeping bear.

Altina smiled. “But I’m sure Latrielle is going to be shocked. Receiving a letter from the man he thought he killed! It’s unfortunate we can’t see his face!”

“I don’t think he’ll come out of the palace. He had a duel with Colonel Coulthard of the High Britannian Army and suffered wounds so severe that he couldn’t even ride a horse. I believe his recovery will take a couple of months.”

“Say what?!”

“Has that information not spread through the military? I suppose it’s being kept under wraps so that the ceremony isn’t postponed. Latrielle seems to be in quite the hurry...”

“The coronation is tomorrow, right...?”

“I noted in my letter that the Fourth Army has come to offer its blessings.”

Altina grimaced. “Like we’d come here to celebrate him...”

“We can’t spin our arrival any other way. It’s the only reasonable excuse we can give for having arbitrarily mobilized the Fourth Army.”

“It’s Latrielle’s fault for sending nonsense reports!”

“Are you going to tell that to the Ministry of Military Affairs?”

“Grr...”

Altina was unable to wipe away her discontent, but she stomached it nonetheless. *Perhaps she’s grown a little from when she said she didn’t want me to leave, Regis mused. If only she had the composure to gather some information before moving an entire army...*

“But this should be effective in itself,” Regis said.

“What do you mean?”

“I believe that emphasizing the Fourth Army’s presence to the citizens of the capital—especially the nobles—will be quite beneficial henceforth.”

“You’re making a nasty face again, Regis...”

“Am I? Well, I can’t play nicely all the time. I’ve already been killed once.”

“Right! Ah, by the way...there’s something that’s been bothering me.”

“What is it?”

Altina reached out her hand and stroked Regis’s hair. “Why did you decide to become a woman? Clarisse laughed herself to tears.”

Wait, so when I saw that her eyes were red... Those weren’t tears of joy?!

“No, this is—”

“We disguised Sir Aurick, as per his request,” Jessica stated plainly.

“N-No, I mean, that’s not untrue, but please don’t phrase it in a way that could cause misunderstandings!”

“Pff...” Fanrine stifled a laugh.

Left with little choice in the matter, Regis explained the details.

In a large tent in the First Army’s encampment—

The sun had already begun to sink behind the western hill when a horseman sped over, waving the flag of a messenger.

“They’ve sent a runner, sire,” Germain called out. He had made a habit of reporting everything he saw, acting as Latrielle’s eyes.

“Indeed,” the prince replied. His right eye had mostly recovered, but his left was as bad as ever. To make matters worse, a medical examination had determined that he would eventually lose his sight entirely.

“Do you think it’s a declaration of war?” Germain wondered aloud.

“Or a petition regarding the death of their tactician?”

“No, I doubt it.”

Latrielle was seated, having come away from the siege with thin but deep cuts on his left shoulder and right thigh. His injuries were bad enough that the doctor had wanted him bedridden, but that simply wasn't an option. Now unable to ride a horse, he was forced to move by carriage.

Germain looked at the prince quizzically. "Why else would they send a messenger?" he asked.

"The group that met up with them... You said they looked like mercenaries, correct? That explains how the tactician and that woman managed to cross the mountains."

"Ah!"

"I presume that messenger is coming to report the miraculous survival of Sir Regis."

"But if you're right and Regis is still alive...shouldn't we still expect a declaration of war?"

"Against the First Army, with those paltry forces? Bear in mind we have another fifty thousand stationed in the capital."

"Th-That's...true..."

"Fear not. No matter how great of a tactician Regis is, he cannot overturn our vastly superior might. Furthermore, a civil war only benefits our enemies. It is inconceivable that we might see any hostilities."

Latrielle spoke firmly, but inside, he was gravely uncertain. In truth, his words were mostly to convince himself. Regis had exhibited an abnormal amount of skill while commanding and strategizing during the liberation of Grebeauvoir; the prince couldn't shake his fears that the tactician might come out with a plan the likes of which he couldn't even fathom.

It wasn't long before the messenger arrived. Germain received and unfurled the correspondence. Latrielle could have read it himself under better lighting conditions, but he struggled when evening came around.

"I-It's as we feared!" Germain stammered. "Regis d'Aurick is alive!"

"Is that so..."

"It follows with an apology for all the trouble he caused you, sire. And a statement that the Fourth Army has mobilized to celebrate your coronation."

"Hmph... Who does he think he's fooling?"

"What shall we do?"

"He's speaking nonsense, but we cannot aggravate the Fourth Army. A civil war is going to harm me the most."

"Sure enough... Five hundred horsemen and four thousand foot soldiers is a bit much for the fourth princess's guard detail, and the remnants of the High Britannian Army are still scattered across our land." It was not completely absurd to say the entire nation was a battlefield.

"And as marshal general, the blame for High Britannia reaching so far into our territory rests with me," Latrielle said, irked. Although the letter came across as rather benign, it was clear that his foe would take full advantage of any careless mistakes. He cursed to himself. This much was to be expected of a plan from that tactician; he had prepared the prince's own countermeasure for him.

"Then...how shall we respond?" Germain asked.

"We congratulate Regis for his safe return and apologize for the misunderstanding. Award him the medals he should have received at Grebeauvoir, invite Argentina to the coronation, and give a warm welcome to every soldier in the Fourth Army. That should cover it."

I'm practically accepting all of their demands... Latrielle thought. He clenched his fists, only to feel two hands rest atop them.

"Please settle down, sire... This is a fine play on your part. The fourth princess shall also have a storm in her heart as she celebrates the enthronement of a political enemy. You are going to be sharing the pain."

"I'm aware of that, but I'm not the one who thought up my response. It was the tactician. He created a situation where this is my only recourse."

"What are you talking about? Even when Regis was operating in the capital, the most he managed was a dubious article in some gossip tabloid. You're still the one ultimately taking the throne."

"Hmm..."

"In fact, the fourth princess's attendance will show everyone who the true emperor is. Are you sure Regis isn't the one holding his head right now?"

"You're right, Germain. I must be growing anxious, what with my coronation before me."

"You're just tired. Let's write our reply and return to the palace; we can leave the rest to the White Hares."

"Right... I'll take your advice. For tomorrow's sake."

And so, Latrielle hopped aboard his carriage and started on his return to the palace. Under Batteren of the White Hares's command, the First Army solemnly marched back to the capital, the Fourth Army following behind them.

The sudden addition of around forty-five hundred soldiers caused an uproar in the supply chain from top to bottom, but...just as Regis had proclaimed, it did seem the soldiers of the Fourth Army would have a warm place to sleep.

Sparks had been flying between the two armies since midday, but now, at nightfall, they were marching down the main street in two lines. Spectators flooded to the sides of the roads. It was a peculiar sight indeed, but the civilians, anxious at the prospect of civil war, could not help but smile and cheer.



The next day—

It was rainy, but that would not stop the coronation. A splendid stage had been erected in the plaza in front of the palace—the same plaza where Bourguine had once given her address. Soldiers clad in glistening full plate saluted in rank and file.

“You’re late, newbie!” yelled a man with large ears and suntanned skin, dressed in a leather flatcap and a seedy business suit. He was Claude, a reporter from *The Weekly Quarry*. A short girl was running after him.

“Please...don’t just...run ahead...like that!” the girl panted. She wore a similar cap and jacket, but she had pale skin and blue eyes. Her blonde hair was tied behind her head.

“Put this on,” Claude said, handing her a wooden board with a symbol burned into it, attached to a thin leather cord so that it could be worn around the neck. He was wearing one as well.

“What is it?”

“A press pass. You can’t even get close enough to see the nobles’ faces without one. See, if we try joining that crowd now, we won’t be able to hear Latrielle’s speech.”

“He’s amazing. People have gathered from all over the Empire. Forget the plaza; the streets are packed to the brim.”

“Don’t be stupid; there are a hundred thousand here at most. That’s a mere fraction of the Empire’s population.”

“That’s still pretty crazy!”

“Maybe... And I must be crazy, entrusting this once-in-a-lifetime event to my junior. Especially seeing as you overslept.”

“Th-That’s only because you wouldn’t let me sleep!” the girl protested, her cheeks turning a bashful red.

“Because your article was so piss-poor, we had to spend all night correcting it!” Claude shot back through gritted teeth. He urged her forward with such a strong push that she almost toppled over, but still, she pressed on.

“Wah! Ah, seriously... Still, I’m surprised you actually managed to get press passes.”

“Yeah.”

“*The Weekly Quarry*’s pretty much become the representative of all the dissidents raising hell around the capital. Honestly, how did... Huh? Wait, this isn’t right, sir. The name on my pass is wrong.”

“You think so?”

“Look! It should say ‘Betty.’ This isn’t even close! Huh? The company name’s wrong too... And, wait, your name’s *completely* wrong, sir!”

“Pipe down. There’s no way the Ministry of Ceremonies was ever going to give *The Quarry* a permit.”

“So these are forged...?”

“Think. How do you expect me to get my hands on a branding iron, especially at such short notice?”

“Then...you stole it.”

“Don’t be stupid. I graciously borrowed them from those who sympathize with our ideals. Let’s make the best of our good fortune, eh?”

“Th-This is a crime!”

“Fine. Give yours back if you’re so against it. I’ll go alone.”

Claude reached out, but Betty twisted to avoid him. “A-Actually, on second thought, you’re the one who stole them. I’m perfectly innocent. And I *do* want to see the ceremony. Latrielle’s super cool.”

“Hah! We’re writing an article to take him down, remember?”

“Really gets the heart racing, doesn’t it?”

“You’re insane. Not that any normal people ever apply to work for us...”

The two passed through the exclusive press gate and mixed in with the large crowd of reporters. The officials did ask for their press passes, but there were so many people barging through that the check consisted of no more than a cursory look over. In hindsight, perhaps even a crude forgery would have gotten them inside. They were, however, strictly screened for weapons.

The podium was in front of the palace gates. The nobles were seated facing it, while the reporters were sectioned off with a fence, positioned to watch from the side. It wasn’t a bad spot—as Claude had said, they were close enough to make out everyone’s expressions—but a line of armored soldiers stood in the way.

“Move! Or at least crouch down!”

It’s a little cute to see them cowering and squatting before seething reporters, Betty thought. Her short stature meant she had to stand on tiptoes to see the stage. “Hah... No sign of Prince Latrielle.”

“Given the rain, he’ll probably stay under shelter until the last possible minute. I don’t see Marquis Bergerac either.” Claude didn’t

usually bother adding noble titles to such names, but he had to be mindful when there was no telling who was listening.

“Bergerac...?”

“Grr... At least remember the name of the minister of ceremonies.”

“Oh, that’s right! I remember! I totally remember! He’s the third prince’s grandfather. Aha ha... I have a hard time memorizing and recalling anything that doesn’t have to do with hotties.”

“Good grief...”

“I had such a hard time remembering you, sir.”

“Shut up.” Claude parted the reporters and started making his way closer to the stage. Betty was smaller, so she had to stick to his back if she wanted to press on. Upon reaching the front, Claude leaned over the low fence and pointed. “Look at those lines of nobles.”

“They’re positively sparkling.”

“You should memorize the order they’re sitting in.”

“What does it mean?”

“Front right is where the top noble sits, and they go down in importance from there. This seating order’s the result of a grand power struggle. You could call it a flat-out indication of each noble’s current political standing.”

“Oh, I see.”

“A new emperor means different nobles might be favored. And so the order changes.”

“I see, I see...” Betty nodded. She would have noted this information down, but all the journalists pushing her from behind made it a near-impossible task. There was a serious chance she would have been squashed flat by now had Claude not been there; he had resorted to

pressing both hands against the fence to form a barrier of sorts for her. “Are the ones in the front the royal family?”

“The current ministers too. They’re special. They don’t need to nestle up to the emperor; in fact, the nobles are supposed to nestle up to them.”

“Hmm. Even the ministers?”

“The ministers are like the representatives of the nobles. Even the emperor can’t fire them without reason, otherwise there’ll be trouble. The nation won’t function. Worst-case scenario, there could be a large-scale civil war.”

“Oh really?”

“In short, they’re super nobles who can’t be ignored. Oh, look! It’s Princess Argentina!”

“Wowser! I’m a huge fan!”

The other reporters were in an uproar over the entrance of the woman who was second in notability only to the emperor himself. The fence grated and Claude’s arms began to tremble as the crowd pushed even harder; he was barely able to hold everyone back.

“Grr... Nghh...”

“Are you okay, sir?”

“Yeah... That red-haired, crimson-eyed young woman? Get a good look at her while you can. She became a lieutenant general at fifteen. She’s a hero who turned the tide of the war: Marie Quatre Argentina.”

“Talk about crazy!”

“If you’re a reporter, you should really do something about your vocabulary. Anyways, the guy next to her is even crazier!”

“Oh?”

“First-Grade Admin Officer Regis d’Aurick. They call him the Wizard. He’s dressed like a man today, I see...” Claude chuckled. “He looked better in a dress.”

Betty tilted her head. The man walking beside the princess was wearing a formal uniform, but he was slender and slumped forward. “Um... That spindly guy is Regis?” she asked. “He’s not just the princess’s bag carrier?”

“That’s *Sir* Regis to you. He might just be a chevalier, but he’s still a noble.”

“Yuck. My image of him is ruined.”

“Hey, I thought the same thing the first time I met him. Behind them is...the Empire’s Sword, Eddie Fabio de Balzac.”

“Whoa, a hottie!”

“Rumor had it he disappeared during the national day celebrations... I guess he really did follow the fourth princess.”

“What sort of person is he?”

“He’s the best swordsman in the Empire. Never lost a sparring match, although I heard he hates the battlefield.”

“Hmm.”

“He was apparently working as First Prince Auguste’s bodyguard. But now that Auguste has retired and put his support behind Argentina, I guess he’s in the princess’s faction. Just as expected.”

“I don’t see Prince Auguste anywhere.”

“Or any silver hair, at that.”

“There is some brown hair, though.” The other reporters had noticed too; their surroundings were astir as surprise spread among the nobles.

“Seriously...” Claude groaned. “That’s Third Prince Heinrich Trois Bastian! I never thought he’d express his support for the princess too! And on the day of the coronation, no less! This is getting interesting!”

“Mm... Huh? What’s so interesting?”

“Think about it. Second Prince Latrielle is gonna take the throne. The smart thing to do is to support him—even an idiot could see that.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

“Despite that, Third Prince Bastian, on the very day the match is decided, chooses to publicly associate with Princess Argentina!”

“Are you sure they didn’t just happen to enter together?”

“This ain’t your everyday bar! If they didn’t want to show their alliance, they would have entered separately.”

“Ah, I see.”

“You don’t get it, do you? He chose to side with Princess Argentina because of our coverage. This is the best!”

“Eh? Is that true?!”

“Oh, right. You weren’t there. I’ll explain when we get back.”

Betty offered a vague nod in response. *It must have been the illegal sort of reporting if he can’t talk about it here*, she concluded.

A sinister smile played on Claude’s lips. “Aha ha... Emperor Latrielle’s a ship setting out in a storm. The fact that Prince Bastian is supporting Princess Argentina practically screams that those rumors about Prince Latrielle killing his father aren’t complete nonsense.” It was clear to see why the nobles were so boisterous, and with that thought, he turned his gaze to Regis. “Did you set all this up...?”

“Sir.” Betty pointed at the seated nobles. “What about the ones in the second row?”

“Up front, you have those from around the capital—the important central nobles. Latrielle’s faction, so to speak. Not only do they have wealth and military might, but the prince they’re backing is about to become emperor. They must be jumping for joy.”

“The rich get richer. Can’t say I like that.”

“Next up are the new nobles from the south. Do you know about the Gaillarte Garden Party?”

“O-Of course I do,” Betty replied, her eyes wavering in contrast to her already feeble assertion.

Claude sighed. “I told you to read up before we arrived. They hold vast tracts of fertile land to the south and have built up a fortune trading with the many small nations in the area.”

“So they’re loaded?”

“Yeah, and they can put up a good fight against the power-hungry central nobles. I thought they were in the princess’s faction, but...I guess, even then, that still puts them above the western nobles.”

“So the western nobles come third?”

Claude nodded. “They were second during the previous emperor’s reign... They have a prestigious history, but the old, established houses in the west have fallen. Now they’re little more than poor nobles in the countryside. They suffered the most damage in the war against High Britannia.”

“Ah, right. Makes sense if they’re in the west.”

Behind those three powers, the other miscellaneous provincial nobles lined up. They were viscounts and other lower ranks—houses with minimal assets. Similarly to the common spectators, they weren’t even afforded seats.

“Hmm?” It was then that Betty noticed something. “The eastern nobles didn’t come?”

“There’s a rumor going around that Latrielle assassinated Juhaprecia. War could break out in the east at any second.”

“Pff... Aren’t we the ones who spread that rumor?”

“Hey. Keep quiet about that,” Claude chided, although he was clearly holding back laughter as he said it. On closer inspection, every noble seemed keen on getting even a single seat ahead. Meanwhile, there were a surprising number of vacancies among the high nobles.

“Is it because of the rain?” Betty asked.

“No... There are a few nobles claiming *lèse-majesté* and protesting that the suspicions of the prince assassinating the emperor were never addressed. They’re the sorta folk who would hold a duel for their honor.”

“Come to think of it, the empress consort isn’t here either.”

“Hm? You’re right... Oh, it’s about to start. Remember the order; we’re putting it in the article.”

“Leave it to me!”

The greatest disturbance in the Ministry of Ceremonies had been caused by the empress consort, Latrielle’s mother. Soon after *The Weekly Quarry* had divulged the grand chamberlain’s testimony, she had disappeared from the imperial court. Even now, her whereabouts were unknown, and so this empty seat in the frontmost row invited quite a bit of speculation.

A bugle sounded to mark the beginning of the ceremony, and then came the rhythmic beating of a drum. The coronation opened to a dignified musical performance.



Inside a waiting room in the palace—

Latrielle was dressed in the Empire's traditional robes and was quietly waiting for the coronation to begin when Germain entered the room. "It doesn't look like we're going to find the empress consort in time..." the adjutant said.

"I see," Latrielle replied. "Then she will not attend."

"Our surveillance loosened because of yesterday's uproar. My apologies."

"What are you apologizing for? Am I an infant who cannot host a ceremony without his mother?"

"No, that's not what I—"

Latrielle leaned close to Germain and whispered into his ear, ensuring that nobody else would overhear. "She is a vile serpent who poisoned my brother so that her own son could take the throne. Be vigilant. She's most dangerous when she can't be seen."

Germain swallowed hard. "I'll double our search efforts at once."

"Do so in moderation; the safety of our attendees is our top priority. My reputation will be tarnished if anything happens to my guests during my coronation."

"Yes, sir. I won't let you down!"

After giving a salute, Germain exited the waiting room. Latrielle was alone once more. He opened a wooden chest containing his personal effects and took out a painting small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Depicted on it was a black-haired woman in an apron.

"Beatrice... I've finally made it this far..."

There came a sudden knock on the door, which prompted Latrielle to return the painting to his chest. As soon as he stepped outside the palace, he was struck by the tune of the band and the cheers of the crowd. In spite of the rain, the square and the streets were brimming with people.

Latrielle approached the stage and slowly began making his way up its stairs—a mere eight steps. *How much blood have I spilled to climb them?* he wondered. Once he reached the fourth step, he could see who stood at the podium.

“Father...”

Before him was the shriveled face of the late emperor, a sword thrust through his heart. It was, of course, all an illusion. The man was already six feet underground, as was the sixth consort who stood beside him.

“Begone, witch...”

She was a demon who drained the lifeblood of the Empire; I feel not even a pang of guilt for what happened to her...

Or so Latrielle told himself. He climbed another step, this time trampling an enemy general he had defeated in battle. Then he trod on his own soldiers who had died under his command. By the time he reached the seventh step, he could feel his legs giving way.

“Auguste... My brother...”

Latrielle saw the young man his mother had poisoned. He saw his peaceful smile and the black blood that spilled from his purple lips. The cheers of the crowd warped until they sounded almost like the dire, vengeful wails of those forever damned to hell. He could feel the sweat beading on his brow before trickling down his cheeks. It was as though he were sinking into quicksand; his legs would carry him no farther.

Before Latrielle knew it, his composure had started to crumble. He no longer had the strength to stop his tears, which now streamed freely down his cheeks.

“Sire!” came a voice from behind him. “Eternal glory to the Empire!”

It was Germain. In an instant, the corpses—the hallucinations—were gone. Now before Latrielle were the stage, the lines of nobles, and the cheering civilians. He raised one hand in response.

“Naturally!”

Latrielle took the stage, and the cheers grew louder still. His gaze fell on the lined-up nobles; they were all dressed up like peacocks, their smiles practically dripping with greed. Among them, only Argentina and those around her looked at him with sharp, disapproving eyes.

Glare at me all you want. It's too late.

The empress consort was still absent. Latrielle was not sad about this; rather, he found it somewhat uncanny.

Marquis Bergerac, the minister of ceremonies, stepped out and proclaimed the start of the ceremony to thunderous applause. He was so pale that he looked as though he might collapse at any second. Perhaps he was mindful of the fact that his grandson, Bastian, had taken Argentina's side.

The ceremony proceeded without delay—the head of the church chanted a blessing and bestowed the crown upon the man who had moments ago been the second prince. Only in that moment did it truly feel real. Latrielle looked up at the lead-colored sky, at the rain that continued to pour down from above.

Even if the heavens disapprove, I am now the emperor. I shall be the serpent that swallows nations whole!

“The Belgarian Empire is the only superpower that belongs in these lands!” Latrielle declared. “With no enemies left to fight, I promise you eternal peace and prosperity. Follow me! And then, I shall give you victory!” He raised a fist to the sky, and cheers reverberated through the plaza like thunder.

“Vive l’empereur! Long live the emperor!” the people cried. As their celebrations continued, the band sprang to life once more, erupting into the Belgarian national anthem.

On August 13th, during the 851st year of the Belgarian imperial calendar, Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria became the new emperor of the Belgarian Empire.

Chapter 2: The Banquet

After the ceremony came the banquet. The massive hall of the imperial palace had been decorated to be as resplendent as possible, and its tables were laden with food. Crimson cloth embroidered with gold adorned the walls, and a marble statue caught the eye, carrying a vase from the east containing massive, blooming flowers the likes of which nobody had ever seen before. A vast number of paintings and carvings were likewise met with longing stares from the visitors; most were masterpieces over a hundred years old, from the golden age of Belgarian fine art. All this was accompanied by the vibrant tune of an orchestra and the countless nobles who had taken the opportunity to turn themselves into walking exhibitions of valuable gemstones.

“This is incredible...” Regis breathed as he followed Altina into the hall.

“Yeah. It’s just as lavish as it was during our nation’s anniversary.”

“Are you sure you should be dressed like that?”

Altina had opted to put on a military uniform, although she wasn’t in her usual light armor. Instead, she wore a ceremonial alternative that sported some decoration, along with a small, single-edged sword at her waist. “Right now, I consider myself a lieutenant general in the imperial army rather than a princess,” she explained.



Latrielle's coronation meant that Altina no longer had any right to the imperial throne, as per a Belgarian custom that was waived only under extreme circumstances. She had initially found this knowledge hard to bear, but it seemed that she had since turned over a new leaf. Although her path to becoming empress was no more, that did not mean she had to cast aside her ideals. Rather than viewing herself as a princess without inheritance rights, she had come to place more value in her position as a lieutenant general.

Even if she'd been born a commoner, I'm sure she would have put her all into achieving her goal, Regis thought to himself. Even so, there was no mistaking that things were now more difficult. As far as he was concerned, this situation had resulted from his own cowardice and indolence. *I won't hesitate any more.*

Failing to act decisively at this juncture would cost Altina her dream. To Regis, that thought was even more painful than ceasing to breathe.

Altina's gaze suddenly caught on one of the items on display. Barely a moment passed before she started scampering over to it, calling out, "Over here, Regis!"

"I would never have expected you to be so interested in a piece of art," Regis mused aloud. "Ah. I see."

She was racing toward a longsword of crimson and gold, the blade of which was unsheathed for all to see. It glimmered such a radiant hue that Regis had to wonder whether it really was forged from pure gold, but that couldn't have been the case; while malleable, gold was much too soft for a practical weapon.

"One of the seven swords forged from the trystie bestowed upon Belgaria's first emperor by the fae..." Regis muttered. "Since the blade is gold, this must be the *Rage Volcanique Sis* (The Emperor's Volcanic Rage VI)."

“This is my first time seeing it,” Altina remarked.

“As I recall, it hasn’t left the treasury in quite some time.”

“It looks weak.”

“No, no... It definitely does *look* a little decorative compared to the other swords, but there are records of it being used in war.”

“So, what special traits does it have?”

“You’re supposed to use it with a shield, apparently. To realize its potential, it requires the wielder to use sword techniques that have fallen out of fashion in modern Belgaria.”

“Hmm...” Altina folded her arms and then let out a small, frustrated growl. “It’s irritating how that actually got me a little excited.”

Regis chuckled. “That’s harmless enough, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s not. Not at all. That blasted Latrielle... Did his tastes change the moment he became emperor? I thought he hated garish parties and pointless spending.”

Regis looked around the hall. “I can’t deny that it looks as extravagant as the parties from Emperor Vicente’s era.”

The fact that so many paintings remained from those bygone days certainly aided the comparison. Emperor Vicente had adored the arts and invested heavily into the industry of culture...although his wasteful spending did end up devastating the nation.

“He’s always been out fighting some war or another, but...” Altina furrowed her brow. “Latrielle always has had an artistic side. His cousin was a painter; he got along pretty well with her.”

“Huh? H-His cousin?”

“His uncle’s daughter. On his mother’s side.”

“So she’s not royalty then. But she has to be from some notable house. Do you know her name?”

“Her name? Um... Bee... Bea, maybe? Yeah. Well, anyways, I heard that she often spoke with Latrielle about art.”

“Is that so? I would have thought that a painter so closely related to royalty would have become famous even with a dubious level of skill, but this is my first time hearing about her.”

“That’s because she, uh... She died a while back.”

“Oh, I see...”

An increase in the birth rate both within the royal family and in society as a whole had greatly increased the size of the youngest generation, which in turn meant there were far too many names to record and remember. As rare as female painters were, if this woman had passed away before she could produce any notable works, it was understandable that she never made it into any meaningful books. Her relation to royalty might have resulted in her name being noted, if nothing else, but such a fleeting mention wouldn’t have been enough to seize Regis’s attention.

Regis turned his attention to one of the paintings. “Do you think that has anything to do with this? I mean, with this art-filled banquet?”

“I’m not so sure. Maybe he’s just especially happy about finally becoming emperor.”

“He didn’t look too elated during the ceremony. He wore the same expression as when he would encourage his men before a great battle.”

Latrielle’s first address as emperor had been akin to a declaration of war against all the surrounding nations. For this very reason, it was unsettling that his banquet seemed so...expensive. Did he have a separate objective somewhere?

“Pardon me.” As they were caught up in their conversation, a somewhat elderly gentleman came over and gave a deep bow. Regis took him to be a noble who had come to greet Altina, but this was not the case. “I work in the capital as an art dealer of sorts.”

“An art dealer?” Regis asked.

“An art dealer, indeed. If you so wish, I can tell you the story behind this painting.”

“So Latrielle even prepared an interpretation service...” Altina murmured.

“It may be rare at parties like this one,” Regis replied, “but it is quite common at art exhibitions.”

“Oh, really?” Altina asked, her head tilted quizzically.

Regis shrugged in response. “I’ve never been to an art exhibition myself, so I really can’t say.”

“Is that so?” the art dealer asked. “I suppose a young soldier might not be too interested in the world of art. Emperor Vicente commissioned this masterpiece himself, and it has been preserved in the palace treasury for a great many years. The master painter Filippo spent three years completing it, and...”

Regis refrained from weighing in, having come to the conclusion that this story was meant for Altina. It was true that he had never before stepped foot in an art exhibition, but this certainly wasn’t due to any disinterest on his part. Until not too long ago, he had been a commoner on a meager salary—a lowly tactician who lacked both the qualifications to enter such events and the money required to pay the admission fee. There were numerous paintings that had come up in his stories and plenty of works he hoped to see at least once before he died.

By the time the art dealer's explanation was over, Altina was looking rather impressed. "I would never have guessed this painting was so important," she said. "I thought it was about as trivial as the ones hung around the palace."

Actually, I assume those paintings are of the same caliber as this one... Regis retorted to himself. La Branne was widely praised for its likeness to a grand art museum; Altina's inattention presumably stemmed from her having grown so accustomed to the greatest art in the world.

"Just between us," the art dealer added in a hushed voice, "there's a rumor going around that Emperor Latrielle is going to put the pieces unveiled here up for sale."

"Oh, really?" Altina replied, wholly uninterested. Regis, in contrast, considered this news far more important.

"I see... So that's it. This banquet is being held to fill the nation's war chest," Regis said. That explained the gaudy displays; a reserved party would do little to loosen the wallets of the nobility. He smiled at the painting and then nodded.

"They're all masterpieces, if not national treasures, so anyone who obtains one will become the talk of high society," the art dealer explained. "That prestige will remain with them even if they one day have to part with the paintings, and it will no doubt raise their opinion of the emperor."

"The thought of something raising Latrielle's reputation doesn't make me happy in the least," Altina remarked.

"I-Is that so?" the art dealer stammered before forcing out an awkward chuckle. The princess's words would have been taken as blasphemous were she not royalty herself.

Naturally, the art dealer understood the statuses of all those attending the banquet. The average noble would not be able to

purchase a world-class masterpiece, so he needed to be selective when spreading the rumor. Thus, he had approached Altina knowing that she was a princess.

That said, it seemed the man had not been thorough enough in his research to account for Altina's personality. The princess was by no means sympathetic enough to put on a modest act, especially so soon after losing a power struggle.

"Regis. His reputation aside, does Latrielle gain anything else from selling a few paintings?" Altina asked.

"Let me see..." Regis whispered a figure into the art dealer's ear. "Is that about right?"

"My apologies, but this painting is valued at around double that amount. Were the decision up to me, however...I would be willing to negotiate something closer to your asking price."

The conversation thus far should have made it clear that Regis and Altina had no intention of making any purchases, but this was a man with a commendably persistent commercial spirit. In any case, Regis's estimate had not been completely off base.

Not wanting to give the art dealer any false hopes, Regis gave a polite bow and then returned to his conversation with Altina. "Wow, what an amazing amount!" he proclaimed. "If even half of the pieces here manage to sell, we could recuperate all of our losses from our war against High Britannia and then some."

"Gwah?! That much?!"

"The paintings collected here are national treasures. They're worth enough to put a dent in the national treasury."

Of course, Regis's estimation was based on the cost of employment and training fees; imperial soldiers couldn't be bought or sold, nor could they be brought back from the dead. Furthermore, with how

expensive the art pieces were, it was hard to imagine they would sell quickly...

Altina sighed. “My sword is great and all, but I really should have taken a few paintings with me too, way back when.”

“Aha ha... I can’t imagine any high nobles would have bought anything from you. As the art dealer said, the whole appeal is that they’re making a purchase from the new emperor.”

“Meaning they’re emptying their pockets to curry favor with him?”

“Such flattery is essential to being a noble.”

“Just make a donation then. I feel sorry for the poor paintings.”

Regis offered a wry smile; at no point had he thought to consider the paintings themselves. “If the new emperor started taking money without offering compensation, it might be perceived as a levy.”

“So? Nobles levy taxes on the commoners all the time.”

“Perhaps, but having the contribution be mandatory would cause any affected nobles to lose face. The situation might not end up bad enough to spark a civil war, but the imperial army might as well be considered a collection of noble armies. For Emperor Latrielle to walk the path of war, he needs to keep the support of the nobility.”

As emperor, Latrielle held absolute authority, but a majority of the Empire’s soldiers and civilians were under the rule of nobles. And although these nobles pandered to the emperor, the emperor could not show them any disrespect. It was an entanglement that had continued for centuries.



Latrielle took the stage to fanfare, much like he had during the ceremony, while nobles formed a line to pay him their respects. It

was almost identical to how things had gone with the previous emperor during the national day celebration.

“As I announced during the ceremony, I am looking to expand the Empire’s territory,” the new emperor said from his platform. “We shall take in all nations in our vicinity and form a power so great that no enemies will oppose us.”

As the nobles applauded this declaration, Altina sighed. She and Regis were watching from a corner of the hall. “Do they even understand what Latrielle’s saying?” she asked, beside herself. “He just told them we’re about to enter an era of war. Are they ready for that?”

“They don’t have much choice,” Regis replied. “Voicing their opposition to the emperor’s policies here will only result in them being isolated, even among other nobles.”

“But we came so close to losing against High Britannia alone!”

A few nobles overheard this heated remark and glanced over. It was clear from their expressions that they were wondering what house such an idiotic outburst had come from, but upon finding their answer, they frantically looked away. Everyone knew that the Fourth Army’s contributions had been responsible for the Empire’s victory in its most recent war.

Regis gestured for Altina to lower her voice. “Still, we won in the end. That’s what matters to them.”

“Because of you, right?”

“I...wouldn’t go that far. You’re overestimating me. Belgaria is strong—it would have come out on top even without my involvement,” Regis said. His self-esteem was lower than ever, and as far as his involvement in the war went, he was concerned only that he hadn’t been able to reduce the casualties even more.

Altina pursed her lips. “I have to disagree about Belgaria being strong. High Britannia only had thirty thousand troops. Thirty thousand. And how many did we lose?”

“The nobles are aware, but I think they’re taking Emperor Latrielle’s words to be a show of resolve or an ultimate goal rather than an immediate course of action. It would be strange for him to act so irresolutely so soon after taking the throne.”

“But this is Latrielle we’re talking about; when he says there’s going to be war, he means it.”

“I assume his sense of values is too alien for them to understand,” Regis observed. Latrielle and Altina were unique cases in that they had their own ideals they would give their lives to realize. Most nobles were more than happy to maintain the status quo.

As the applause continued, Latrielle nodded to his audience. “I am pleased to hear that you all endorse my position,” he said. “We lost many great men in our last war, so I’m sure some of you feel uneasy hearing about the path we must take. That is why, although it may be somewhat uncouth to show this with all the ladies present...I would like to show you our secret weapon.”

Latrielle gestured with his eyes, and within moments, Germain had joined him on stage. The adjutant was carrying a cylinder covered in white cloth, which he then started to unwrap, his movements intentionally slow to build up tension. And then...the nobles were astir. Presented before the audience was the same rifle that Regis had seen just a few days prior—a prototype, granted, but an impressive weapon nonetheless.

“The indifference of my predecessor gave High Britannia the opportunity to surpass us in the arms race,” Latrielle continued, “but thanks to the Empire’s many fine technicians, we have already begun mass production of the newest firearms!”

Upon hearing this news, the gathered noblemen erupted in cheers. Noblewomen weren't advised to speak on military or political matters, so they all remained silent...except Altina.

"Even if you have rifles—!"

"Now, now," Regis interjected. "The emperor is speaking."

"I mean...!"

"I know what you want to say, but we haven't come here to argue."

Latrielle went on to guarantee that Belgaria's guns surpassed anything the other nations could produce, and he promised to loan them to the noble armies for cheap. Most nobles rejoiced, as though the Empire had won another war, although there were a few grim faces among them.

"Loan..."

The equipment of most noble armies—that is, their swords, spears, and armor—were either made by in-house blacksmiths or purchased from merchants. Such was how things had always been done, which was precisely why some were uncomfortable with a system where such things were produced in a national factory and only distributed on a temporary basis.

Looks like some of them have keen instincts, Regis thought.

Latrielle's ultimate intention was to replace noble armies with a uniform national military, but he knew that abolishing them all at once would cause an uproar. Nobles relied on their personal armies to maintain their special privileges, which was why he was instead taking a roundabout approach by nationalizing the production of guns and ammunition. Regis fully understood what was going on, but he saw no reason to inform the nobles; at the end of the day, he viewed the abolition of noble armies as a necessary step in the establishment of peaceful diplomacy.

Just as Regis assumed that Latrielle was concluding his address, the new emperor spoke again. “Recently...the advancement of technology has allowed the unenlightened to spread their dishonest views throughout our society. We are consequently facing an increase in completely baseless rumors.”

Regis was taken aback; he had expected Latrielle to ignore the circulating suspicions entirely. Although he hadn’t said it outright, it was obvious that he was criticizing *The Weekly Quarry*. He was even dismissing its reporting as no more than unsubstantiated gossip.

“Eh?!” For an instant, Regis felt as though Latrielle had glared right at him. *Was that my imagination? He’s the emperor now; he wouldn’t spare even a thought on the likes of me...*

Before he could fully convince himself, however, Altina cocked her head to one side. “Why did Latrielle glare at us just now?”

“Ah, you saw that too?”

“It wasn’t exactly subtle. Is he that frustrated about you being alive?”

Regis could no longer pass it off as his imagination. He covered his mouth with one hand and whispered into the princess’s ear. “Did you hear about Marquis Beclard’s testimony making it into *The Weekly Quarry* yesterday?”

“I didn’t know the name of the paper, but yeah, I definitely heard something about it.”

“I’m responsible for that.”

“Huh...?”

“I went as far as to forge Germain’s signature to get Beclard out of his manor.”

“What?!”

“It wasn’t a decisive enough move to prevent Latrielle’s enthronement, but I’ve laid the groundwork for our counterattack.”

Altina stared at Regis in amazement. “If you’ve done all that, what made you think he *wouldn’t* glare at you?!”

“Well, erm... Are you being serious...? I thought he’d see me as no more than a pebble on the wayside...”

“What do you think, Regis? About the allegations, I mean.”

“After hearing Beclard give his testimony, I’m certain there’s some truth to them.”

“In that case...!”

“Right now, the Empire needs stability and recovery under a young and competent emperor. There isn’t any material evidence to prove the allegations, and what we have is too weak to overturn Latrielle’s coronation. At the very least, I’m not going to drag Beclard out and have him testify before the nobles.”

“Why’s that?”

“The grand chamberlain previously stated that he recognizes Latrielle as the next emperor, so if we have him openly voice his suspicions here, he may be seen as inconsistent. And if the people conclude that his testimony regarding the emperor’s assassination is a lie, we have almost no means by which to disprove them.”

“Ah. I see...”

“His testimony isn’t the holy spear that will topple the dragon.”

“So it was just harassment?”

“To Latrielle, at least. That’s why he’s denying it here, and why he’s letting me live.”

“Well, no matter his intentions, I won’t let him lay another finger on you, Regis.”

She's my superior. Am I not supposed to be the one protecting her? Regis wondered. He knew that he wasn't strong enough to serve as her shield, however, so he made no attempt to correct her. Instead, he just awkwardly scratched the back of his head. "We'll never achieve our ideals if you fall, though. Please don't forget that."

"Of course!"



Again, Regis was sure that Latrielle's address had reached its conclusion, and again, it progressed on to another topic entirely. It seemed this was where things truly began.

"Marie Quatre Argentina," Latrielle announced. "Come forth."

The ruckus among the nobles that followed was bigger than any since the ceremony had commenced; the emperor was nominating someone he had been in a power struggle with only moments before. To complicate matters further, the princess was now a war hero. How was Latrielle going to treat her? This sudden confrontation brought the investment and excitement of all those gathered to a climax.

Of course, Altina had no intention of cowering or running away. She took the nervously stammering Regis by the hand with a bold, "Here we go!" and confidently started toward the stage, moving the attending nobles aside as if parting a sea of gemstones. Soon enough, she was standing in front of the platform with a hand on her hip, glaring at the new emperor.

"What's your game, calling me out personally like this?" Altina asked.

"First, why not congratulate me, Argentina? Our father cautioned you on this as well—you're simply too impatient."

The nobles watched Altina as eagerly as they had when she was considered a target of ridicule, amused to see the new emperor

demanding congratulations from a political rival. Latrielle was demanding the princess's obedience, and there was a chance she might even be executed if she refused.

"Hmph! Congratulate you? Are you stupid or something? Why in God's name would I do that? Your goal was never to be emperor—no, it's something far beyond that. I'm not ill-natured enough to flatter someone who's only come halfway!"

Tensions were already high, and Regis could feel a grating pain in the pit of his stomach. A moment of silence passed, and then Latrielle burst into laughter.

"Gwa ha ha! Yes, precisely! As expected of my sister, the worthy foe who fought for the throne till the very end. You are correct, Argentina. My sights are set on the great beyond. I shall take your words as encouragement."

"That so? Well, let me make one thing clear: this isn't over yet. I'm not giving up. I'll chase my ideal in my own way!"

"Your ideal of a country without war?"

"A *world* without war."

"That's nothing more than a pipe dream."

"Perhaps. But if we can't achieve it, humanity is done for."

Most of the nobles snickered at this remark; they viewed pacifism as the delusional dream of a little girl, and so they were entirely unwilling to support it. There were, however, some intellectuals among the noble class, and the number of serious faces among the crowd was by no means small. The suggestion that humanity would decline should war continue was not a conclusion Regis had made alone; rather, it was an ideology that had already been presented in numerous books. Unfortunately, it seemed its adherents were the minority here.

“I shall not question your ideal, but I *will* ask you to work for the good of the Empire,” Latrielle said, changing the topic without offering even the slightest rebuttal. “I previously had you take over the defense of the northeast front, but I am aware you have reserves to spare. In that case, it seems only logical that I should entrust another shorthanded war front to you.”

“We don’t have any—!”

Regis placed a hand on Altina’s arm, stopping her before she could object. The Fourth Army’s presence in Fort Volks was an effective deterrent against an invasion from the Grand Duchy of Varden, but there was no avoiding that the princess had marched 4,500 soldiers to the capital without having been ordered to. She had only taken such drastic action because she had refused to accept the news of Regis’s death...but the scope of her operation was beyond what was permitted on imperial soil. She had essentially raised an army.

It was entirely reasonable for Latrielle to deem the Fourth Army’s arrival as an act of rebellion and order that its forces be quelled. Regis had thus far managed to avoid this outcome by claiming that such numbers were necessary for the princess to celebrate the coronation of the new emperor. It was a persuasive argument, considering that remnants of the High Britannia Army still lingered in Belgaria, but it also showed how many spare soldiers were currently stationed at Fort Volks.

Altina could certainly object as she had intended to, but she would only undermine her current standing. If she maintained that the soldiers accompanying her *were* needed at Fort Volks, then she was admitting that she had left the Empire vulnerable to another attack.

“The Fourth Army shall support the southern front,” Latrielle announced. “The Sixth and Eighth Armies are already stationed there, but the situation remains unfavorable.”

“Hmm... So we’re going to be aiding the south this time.” Altina glanced at Regis, who responded with a silent nod.

Our only option is to accept. That said, if we’re being made to march south, I’ll make sure he accepts a few of our demands too.

Altina puffed out her chest, respecting Regis’s opinion on the matter. “You sure love pushing your problems onto me, but... Very well! I’ll help you out one more time.”

I don’t hate that you’re so spirited about it, but please don’t end the conversation there, Regis thought. It wasn’t as though he had anticipated them receiving such direct orders here, however, so he hadn’t told Altina anything in advance. To be more precise, he had foreseen countless possible scenarios, but it would have been impossible to tell her about every single one.

“Um...” Regis attempted to get the princess’s attention.

“Hmm?”

“About your rank...remember?” He whispered softly enough that only she would hear him, but much to his surprise, she responded by slapping him on the back.

“Say it louder! Loud and clear, why don’t you!”

“Eeh?!”

“I can’t speak for Belgaria as a whole, but without you, Regis, I wouldn’t have secured many of my biggest victories. And without our win against High Britannia, who knows what would have happened to the Empire? Everyone here knows what you’ve accomplished, so if there’s something on your mind, don’t hesitate to say it. No one’s going to complain.”

Regis groaned as he was subjected to the gazes of countless nobles, many of whom were seeing him for the very first time. It was clear

from their expressions that they were surprised by his appearance, especially after hearing about his grand achievements.

Latrielle reached out a hand from where he stood on the stage. “I hold you in high regard, Regis. Speak whatever is on your mind. Or are you dissatisfied with lending your wisdom to an empire under my reign?”

Regis took a deep breath. “N-Not in the slightest...”

Once upon a time, Regis wouldn’t have been able to breathe with so many nobles staring at him. It was for this very reason that he had completely disregarded the idea of taking the stage himself during the national day celebrations. Instead, his plan had depended on First Prince Auguste and the others. But running away was no longer an option.

“I was born and raised in the capital,” Regis began. “I hold the Empire in my heart, there are a great many people whom I wish happiness upon...and, above all else, I have my own ideals.”

“Indeed. I do not doubt your loyalty in the slightest,” Latrielle replied. He was urging Regis to speak his doubts.

“The Sixth and Eighth Armies have already been deployed to the south, meaning we have forty thousand troops stationed there with more than enough horsemen and cannons. Our threats on that border, Hispania and Etruria, are by no means weak, but they do not have the forces necessary to invade us. If we need reinforcements despite this, I must assume that the issue does not lie with our numbers.”

“Mm-hmm. So you think there must be some deeper reason for my order. Tell me, then, Sir Regis—what do you think the problem is? Do you require time to investigate the matter?”

Regis shook his head. “I doubt we have the leisure for an investigation; I hear the Etruscan Army has already crossed the river.”

“I see... You received my command to march south a mere moment ago, yet you’ve already looked into the situation. I expect no less from you.”

“O-Oh... Well, I am the princess’s tactician, despite everything.”

“Did you foresee my issuing of such an order to the Fourth Army?”

“My role requires me to consider and prepare for as many potential outcomes as possible; this just happened to be one of them.” Regis attempted to lower his head as he spoke, but instead he ended up slouching forward. His mannerisms, which weren’t at all befitting of a soldier, elicited some reserved laughter from the gathered noblewomen.

Far from viewing Regis as some amusing spectacle, however, many of the high-ranking noblemen with experience commanding armies exhaled in admiration. None of their staff officers had considered that the Fourth Army, whose base of operations was a northern fort and who had already dispatched reinforcements to the eastern front, might be sent south. Even if they had entertained the idea, none would have gone as far as to prepare for it; those who were loyal above all else did no more than react to the orders they received, while those who were proactive would at most attempt to foresee their commander’s intentions. It was for that reason among many others that the generals who knew the scene swallowed their breath, taken aback by this unfathomable, feeble-looking man.

“Indeed, the Etruscan Army crossed the great Crena River,” Regis continued. “According to the information available in the capital, they numbered twenty thousand, but I assume they arranged to meet up with reinforcements along the way. Even if we set off at

once, there is no telling what has become of our base at Sembione. There is no time to investigate—but one look at the data is enough to surmise that the problem is not numerical inferiority.”

Latrielle and the nobles listened in silence. At one point in time, they might have assumed that Regis was making an excuse to avoid the southern front, but his mounting success had given his words far more credibility. Regis detested that the weight of a statement depended more on its speaker than its contents, but authoritarianism was deep-rooted in noble society and the military alike.

“The commander of the Sixth Army is a lieutenant general, and so is the commander of the Eighth,” Regis noted. “This is not an issue in itself, since both have similar achievements and manage comparable forces, but if their armies were unified under one commander, it would cause confusion among the officers and make things harder to coordinate.”

“Hmm...” Latrielle placed a contemplative hand on his chin.

“Protecting the south was originally down to the Sixth Army alone; I only dispatched the Eighth Army there last year when our enemies were growing in strength. Since the Sixth Army has been stationed there longer, the right to command remains with them. They should already be unified.”

“There would be no issue if the Eighth Army’s commander were as capable as you, Your Majesty.”

“Hmph. Was that supposed to be flattery?”

“Not at all. I merely want you to recognize that even a lieutenant general may fall short of your own expectations.”

“Oh?” Latrielle leaned closer. Germain looked none too pleased, still gripping the rifle in his hands, but he refrained from weighing in.

“Commanders are forced to make tough decisions in the field, and the problems they navigate seldom have a ‘correct’ solution. That said, one must wonder whether the Sixth Army’s commander deserves the trust that comes with his position. Despite greatly outnumbering his foe, he chose to pull back the line. I would not blame the Eighth Army’s commander for having his doubts.”

“No matter his feelings, he must obey orders. To refuse would be to break military regulation.”

“He will obey, but reluctantly so. He will try to keep his own losses to a minimum, but that only begs the question: is he fighting against the enemy or his orders?”

“Is the imperial army truly made of such feeble soldiers?”

“You lack experience, Your Majesty.”

“The nerve... I *lack experience*? I’ve survived more battlefields than you could possibly imagine. The palace does not simply bark orders!”

“No, of course not. What I mean to say, Your Majesty, is that you have yet to experience a battlefield completely devoid of competent commanders.”

“Hmm.”

“Your own talents mean there is always one present.”

“I...see.”

It was then that Germain finally interjected. “I understand your point, Regis, but the commanders of the Sixth and Eighth Armies are both brave, veteran warriors. Are your claims not discourteous toward them?”

“I read the reports from the battlefield; we have the terrain advantage and completely dwarf our opponent’s numbers,” Regis explained. “If either commander were as capable as His Majesty,

they certainly would not have pulled back the lines and called for reinforcements.”

“How can you be so sure? Could this not also come down to the competence of the enemy commander?”

“That may be the case, at least relatively speaking... And if we assume you’re correct, that simply confirms that we cannot leave our current situation to the commanders of the two armies.”

“I understand now,” Latrielle said, interrupting their quarrel. “Regis, you are doubtful of the officers on the southern border, correct?”

“I mean no disrespect, but...yes.”

“Such insolence!” someone from the audience cried. The commander of the Sixth Army hailed from the central nobles, and those close to him were evidently in attendance. Irritated by Regis’s slander but unable to come out too strongly against him, they had settled for heckling.

The central nobles hate me already, so this is nothing to be concerned about, Regis convinced himself. Altina, however, was much less willing to accept the situation; she fixed the unruly nobles with a glare as she made her thoughts painfully clear.

“The real insolence is coming from those of you who only have the guts to complain when you’re hidden among a crowd! If you’ve got something to say, come out here and say it!”

Regis frantically stopped the princess from going any further. He appreciated the sentiment, but her hostility would only complicate things.

A bitter smile played on Latrielle’s lips. “You seem to struggle with speaking frankly before me, Regis. I will attempt to interpret your intentions. You want me to entrust the southern front in its entirety to Argentina.”

“...It is as you say, sire.”

Altina raised a hand. “I don’t mind, so long as it makes things easier for Regis.”

“P-Princess...”

“Your tactician is, as his title suggests, a tactician,” Latrielle sighed.

“*You* are supposed to be the one making the calls. But so be it. I was just thinking it was time for me to step down from my command position to reorganize the army. It would be strange for someone with forces in the north, east, and south to remain a lieutenant...”

“Sire?!” Germain exclaimed, sounding as panicked as Regis had just a moment ago. “Aren’t you being a bit hasty?!”

“It’s fine... I’ve been considering this for a while now.” Latrielle walked to the very front of his platform, lording over Altina. “Under our current system, a general is granted a single army to command; only the Ministry of Military Affairs may manage forces greater than that. But this is not enough. The system failed us during our last conflict, and it fails us during our current one. We need change. But war will not wait for us.”

“So?” Altina asked. “I get that already. You and Regis both sure love to beat around the bush.”

“You’re too impatient, Argentina. Hear me out. In the imperial army, there are only two positions with the authority to command multiple fronts. The first is the marshal general, the emperor’s proxy. I intend to do away with it,” Latrielle announced. Since the emperor could personally visit the battlefield, there was no need to delegate command of the armed forces, making the marshal general unnecessary. “Therefore, I am left with but one option—”

The nobles were astir. Regis could feel his heart racing. Only Altina calmly awaited the emperor’s next words.

“What?”

“I hereby appoint you *généralissime*. Command the armies as my right hand and achieve absolute victory.”

Upon hearing this, the men with military experience cried out in shock. Even Regis couldn't help but widen his eyes.

I didn't think he was going to give up that much authority!

“Huh? General-is-me?” Altina asked, her head cocked to one side. The very individual who had been granted this historic title didn't quite seem to understand what it meant.

Chapter 3: Southbound

After witnessing the response to Latrielle's announcement, Altina hadn't needed any prompting to know that she should make a swift exit from the hall. Regis was trailing close behind her.

"Good grief..." he said. "This sure is getting messy."

"Are things really that bad in the south?" Altina asked.

"Well, the war isn't going great, which is troublesome enough...but I'm more worried about you being the *généralissime*. In fact, I consider that the main issue."

Altina looked at Regis, puzzled. "The position's one rank higher than a full general, right? I know that much. What's so bad about it?"

"They say lacking greed is a virtue, but I think you just lack interest..." Regis sighed.

"Th-That so...?" Perhaps she would have lashed out at him before, but Altina now understood how crucial it was to address her shortcomings. As they walked down the hall fitted with green carpet, Regis went on.

"I can't blame you, though. There hasn't been a *généralissime* in Belgaria for a very long time. They only really existed on paper, so it's understandable that you don't know their significance."

"So it's not my fault, then!"

"Given your position in the military, I still think you should have known, but we *have* been thrown from one battle to the next. I'm partially to blame too."

"You are?"

"I never brought it up. I'll admit, that was because I never thought you'd actually receive the *Généralissime's* Baton."

“Do you mean this thing?” Altina asked, casually waving around the command baton she had received from Latrielle as proof of her new status. It was gold and almost entirely covered with intricate carvings, with a gemstone embedded at the end.

“Yeah,” Regis replied, watching her anxiously. “It’s been two hundred years since it left the treasury.”

“Hmm.”

“And with the right buyer, it could sell for more than any of the paintings we saw in the hall.”

“Huh?!” Altina almost dropped the baton in her shock, barely managing to grab it again before it passed the point of no return.

“Aha ha... That sure was a close one. God, Regis... Don’t scare me like that.”

“I just lost three years of my lifespan,” Regis noted with a weary sigh, certain that his heart had just stopped. “Please don’t play around with a national treasure.”

“You’re telling me this little thing has enough value to put a dent in the Empire’s treasury...”

That treasured sword you swing around is worth even more... Regis wanted to say. He feared that disclosing this information would influence how she used it, however, so he kept the thought to himself.

Something about Altina had definitely changed. She had always been against spending excessively, but for a reason that Regis couldn’t possibly fathom, she now seemed to have an interest in the value of money too.

“In any case,” Regis said, “although the value of that baton is indeed impressive, the authority you’ve been given is even more outrageous.”

“Latrielle said it has something to do with commanding troops on multiple fronts, right?”

You just received a direct edict from the emperor, yet it sounds like you were barely paying attention...

“A *généralissime* doesn’t have the diplomatic power of a marshal general, meaning they can’t start a war or negotiate treaties, but they can raise, merge, and command multiple armies. They have virtually unlimited authority over all military affairs,” Regis explained. It was, in short, the highest rank an officer could achieve.

“I can raise an army?” Altina asked, her expression conflicted.

“You can hold and invite officers to a military council, where you have the authority to determine the rank, pay, and employment of the soldiers they command. With a single word, you can change the authority and working conditions of your own subordinates. Of course, you’re also free to assign and deploy them wherever you want.”

“Huh? That can’t be right... Isn’t the Ministry supposed to do all of that?” She was beginning to realize the sheer extent of the authority she had received.

“Latrielle said it himself, didn’t he? The Ministry isn’t up to his standards. In fact, I think he’s going to dismantle it entirely.”

“Why?”

“Belgaria suffered massive losses from only thirty thousand High Britannian soldiers. You were livid about it, weren’t you?”

“Yeah...”

“The reason for our struggle was that we were much less prepared than our foe, so it stands to reason that the Ministry should take responsibility. Sure, the faces can change, but if the structure

remains the same, we will see no improvement. Or at least, I believe that's what the emperor has decided."

"S-So you're saying..."

"The emperor and the *généralissime* shall take the Ministry's place in commanding the entire imperial army."

There was a chance that Latrielle might appoint more *généralissimes*, but doing so wouldn't be easy considering the current state of the army. Regis wasn't sure whether he would just strip the Ministry of Military Affairs of its power or do away with it entirely. It was presumably going to depend on how Minister Berard finessed the situation.

"N-No way!" Altina exclaimed, her mouth hanging open. "You can't just drop a bombshell like that on me!"

"I would have preferred to see that reaction before you accepted the baton. Well, whatever the case, you've got little option but to accept it."

"Ah, right... My standing as a princess is meaningless now. I should instead focus on climbing the ranks as a soldier."

"Yeah."

Altina smiled. "So, in a sense, I suppose this is a good thing."

Regis responded only with an ambiguous nod.



Regis and Altina left the palace, having been forced to use a carriage to navigate the crowds of reporters and spectators outside the gate. Versailles was in the midst of a ceremony that would presumably continue for at least a week, so the driver was instructed to avoid the main roads. Instead, he drew a semicircle around the capital and made for a particular residence—namely, the estate belonging to

House Tirasio Laverde. This was where Altina and those close to her were opting to stay, since their poor relationship with the First Army and a good number of the noble class had made being in the imperial palace less than ideal.

Soldiers of the Fourth Army guarded the gate as though this were their strategic headquarters on the battlefield. They had even flown their flag over the yard.

Regis and Altina stepped down from the carriage to lines of servants who had come to welcome them, and the front doors of the villa opened to herald a familiar noblewoman: Fanrine. “Princess Argentina. Regis. Splendid work,” she said.

“Likewise,” the princess replied.

“Thank you. I was unable to attend the banquet, so I was only present for the ceremony. My grandfather should have been there, though.”

“Around half of the southern nobles were absent, even though we finally gained their support... Is it because I lost the power struggle?”

“There isn’t much you could have done about that; the previous emperor passed far sooner than expected.”

Altina paused. “Are you all right? Latrielle hasn’t made any strange demands, has he?”

“I can’t really say... More importantly, though, I’m aware you were appointed *généralissime*. Congratulations.”

“You heard already?”

“Of course! In high society, they say that rumors travel with the faeries.”

So she said, but House Tirasio Laverde was the rallying power for the southern nobles, and it maintained a substantial information network within the capital. One of the nobles in attendance had

presumably sent one of their servants to deliver the news while Regis and Altina's carriage was stalled on the crowded streets.

"Would you like to chat over a meal?" Fanrine asked as she gestured them inside. "It won't come close to a palace banquet, but I have prepared a meager celebration."

"That sounds good to me!" Altina exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "I haven't had a chance to eat all day. I'm starving!"

Fanrine giggled. "Glad to hear it."

"I'll come to the dining hall as soon as I've changed!"

"Of course."

Clarisse the maid was awaiting them from behind Fanrine. "Welcome back, Princess," she said as she took Altina's bags.

"That was way more tiring than sword practice," Altina remarked. "Can you help me change out of all this?"

The maid responded with a silent nod. Aside from when she was in the presence of a select few, she maintained a blank expression and spoke in a level tone that revealed no emotion, such that she seemed uncanny when compared to the servants of the estate.

Regis met Clarisse's gaze, but the maid said nothing. They had just recently reunited after a long time apart, but the situation meant he had been much too busy to speak with her. That said, he was a tactician, and she was the princess's maid; before he could make time, he would have to devise a reason to talk in the first place.

"Come now, Regis. You too," Fanrine said.

"Me? Am I to take part in this celebration?"

"Of course! You've finally reached first-grade! It's harder to get promoted in administration than combat, and I've never heard of a first-grade admin officer as young as you. Isn't that incredible?"

“Yeah... In my case, Latrielle promoted me for my achievements on the battlefield, so I can’t really say it was for administration...”

“You don’t have to think so hard about it. However it came about, you received your promotion because your hard work was recognized. Now, let’s get you into something dry. You’ll catch a cold in those damp clothes.”

“Yeah.”

“Please, allow me to help you.”

“No, I’m good...” Regis politely turned down the proposal and then practically fled to the room he was borrowing on the third floor. As he was making his way upstairs, he ran into Eddie.

“Yo, Regis!”

“Ah, Sir Eddie. You look well.”

“What’s with that, man? We’re of the same status now. Loosen up.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m a first-grade combat officer, and you’re a first-grade admin officer.”

“That’s true, but...I’m a chevalier, and you’re a duke, Sir Eddie.”

“You sure are sweating the small stuff... Fine, then we’re the same rank on the battlefield. How’s that sound to you?”

“This feels a little sudden...”

“You talk normally to Argentina, don’t you? I don’t have many friends here, see, and Latrielle’s gotten so distant...”

It seemed that Eddie had once been close friends with the second prince turned emperor; in their youth, the two had practiced swordplay and ridden horses together. Now that Eddie was First

Prince Auguste's bodyguard and a part of Fourth Princess Argentina's camp, however, it was hard for them to meet on friendly terms.

Now that I think about it, the Fourth Army doesn't have any real connections to high society. There was hardly anyone that Eddie, as both a duke and a first-grade combat officer, could engage with on a personal level.

"And that's why you've picked me?" Regis asked.

"Felicia calls you a good friend, so it stands to reason that we should get along too."

"It would be presumptuous of me to refer to Her Highness, Fifth Princess Felicia as a good friend..."

"She was real ecstatic, telling me how you absolutely crushed her at chess. Apparently, she really liked how you didn't hold back at all."

"B-Back then, I..."

Regis had agreed to play some chess right after the national day celebrations, but his mind had been so focused on the officer work that had piled up that he hadn't thought to hold back. Before he knew it, he was always only a few moves away from winning each game. He was glad that Felicia wasn't angry about it, but it was far too heavy of a burden on him to be friends with royals.

"Now, now." Eddie gave Regis an affable pat on the shoulder. "Let's all get along, eh?"

For a commoner like Regis, befriending a duke wasn't much better, but he understood that turning Eddie down would only come across as rude. For that reason, he conceded with a quiet, "I'll do my best."

"Excellent. Oh, by the way—how was the banquet?" Eddie asked, promptly changing the subject.

“It was pretty luxurious. There were so many art pieces on display that it was like a museum—or like a gallery, I suppose. It seems they’re planning to sell them to fill the war chest.”

Eddie chuckled. “Sounds like something Latrielle would do. He was always going on about how guilty he felt, keeping those works of art locked away where no one could see them.”

“Those don’t sound like the words of a royal... Could his cousin have played a role in that?”

The smile vanished from Eddie’s face. “Beatrice, eh? I wouldn’t doubt it. You really do know everything...” he said with a sigh.

Regis didn’t know the details, nor was he familiar with any Beatrices; he had either forgotten about her or she had gone unnamed in the books he had read. It bothered him, but they were hardly in the right place for such a conversation, and he didn’t want to dig into the matter while unprepared.

“Let’s talk about it another time,” Regis said.

“Yeah... Guess I’m holding you up.”

“I’ll get changed.”

“Right. See you at the dining hall.”

Once the two had exchanged their temporary farewells, Regis parted with Eddie and returned to his room.



Regis ultimately settled on wearing his usual Fourth Army uniform. It was the outfit he was most used to, and after wearing only borrowed clothing for just under a month, donning his old colors filled him with a strange sense of nostalgia.

There was a tapping at the door.

“Come in.”

The first to enter was Third Prince Bastian. “Hey, Regis. You got a moment?” he asked.

“Sir Regis. Good work keeping it together at the ceremony,” Elize said, coming in behind him. “I also heard something about Princess Argentina being appointed *généralissime*. May she be blessed with fortune on the battlefield.”

The girl from High Britannia would occasionally exude a strangely noble air. She looked no different from a normal girl, but for some reason—perhaps because she stood so straight or because she spoke so boldly—Regis felt like correcting his posture.

“Going south, right?” Bastian asked with a strained smile.

Regis nodded. “Correct.”

“Right... Sorry, but I’ll be staying in the capital. There’s still a ton I need to do here. Well, a ton I still need to learn from Professor Bourguine.”

“I understand. You’re not part of the army, so there’s no reason for you to head to a war zone.”

“Something tells me I should be pooling my strength with Argentina’s, but...at this rate, I feel like I’ll end up believing every word you say, Regis. I’ll start acting without thinking.”

“I’m not trying to incite you. Honestly.”

“I get that. Just means I need to study more.”

“Well, do your best.”

“No need to tell me! I’ve got to put in the work for my future masterpiece! Ah, that aside...could I ask for a bit of a favor?”

“Go on.”

“See, Elize here... I was wondering if you could get her to the Tirasos Laverde estate down south.”

“The main house?”

Elize lowered her head. “Could you please?”

“W-Wait a second,” Regis stammered. “What’s going on? Aren’t you two...?”

“What are you talking about, Sir Regis?!” Elize exclaimed, waving her arms around frantically. “Bastian and I do not have a deeper relationship in any sense, framing, or definition of the term!” Her face was bright red, so it was clear to see she was speaking out of embarrassment.

“R-Right...” Bastian added, hanging his head.

Regis looked at them quizzically. “Guarding important personnel is a duty of the imperial army, especially when done at the request of the Third Prince himself. But, if you would allow me to ask...why would you need to head off to a war zone?”

Elize was at a loss for words, so Bastian answered in her place. “Elize needs to get to the Tiraso Laverde manor, no matter what. I’m really sorry, but I can’t tell you any more than that.”

“I see...”

“I’d come along too, but...” Bastian trailed off, balling his hands into tight fists.

Elize shook her head. “You’ve saved me far too many times already. If you followed me south, I’m sure you would follow me all the way across the sea. Instead, what you need right now is to study. This is going to be the most important moment of your life, Bastian, and I cannot bring myself to snatch it away from you,” she said, her tone calm but resolute.

“I get that,” Bastian muttered, biting his lip. “We’ve already reached an agreement.”

“You’re a good boy...” Elize said. Although she looked like a young lass, the way she spoke made her seem like an older sister or perhaps even a mother.

“I’ll come to see you. Mark my words.”

“I’ll be waiting. Once I fulfill my own duty.”

“Next we meet, I’ll make good on that promise we made. You’ll finally be reading my masterpiece.”

“Erk... Not the most encouraging prospect, but I’ll steel myself.”

“It’ll be a blast, I tell you! A romance so great you’ll be laughing your guts out!”

“Laughing your guts out”? Should that really be the aim of a love story? Regis wondered. There were more pressing matters at hand, though. Based on their conversations, he had a rough idea of who Elize really was, and he could imagine why she would need to cross the ocean at a time like this.

Elize turned to Regis. “If I am to be under your care, there’s something I must confess...”

“Oh, no... Given my position, it will be quite a bit more convenient if you remain Ms. Elize, a transfer student from High Britannia.”

“Huh?”

“I might not be much, but I’ve become the tactician of the *généralissime*’s military council. I am roughly equivalent to the aide to the Minister of Military Affairs.”

“Assuming Princess Argentina does indeed open a council.”

“And so, if news broke that you knowingly hid something from me, it would be considered a serious breach of national trust. This wouldn’t be the case if nobody ever noticed.”

“Regis...”

“After all, I’m not nearly as capable as everyone makes me out to be. There are plenty of things that slip by me. Aha ha.”

Elize bowed reverently. “Personally, and as the representative of all that I stand for, I offer my utmost gratitude.”

“Yeah.” Bastian held out his right hand. “Thanks, Regis.”

“I think I understand how it feels to part from those who are precious to you. I’ll get her there, no matter what it takes,” Regis declared, taking the hand the prince had presented to him. The gesture hadn’t come naturally to him—in fact, he had been rather hesitant about it, not wanting to come across as too arrogant—but it was necessary to acknowledge the trust being placed in him.

Bastian’s eyes began to well up with tears, and his shoulders trembled with each labored breath. “I-I’m counting on you...” he managed to choke out.

“Owww!” Regis cried out. “Ow, ow, ow!”

“Ah, my bad! Guess I used too much strength.”

“I really thought it was about to break there...” Regis commented as he shook his now throbbing hand. Either he was too weak, or Bastian was too strong. Presumably, it was a mixture of both.

Elize started to giggle, but there was no hiding the transparent droplets that had risen to her eyes.



Bastian and Elize did not attend dinner; instead, they opted to leave the villa, stating that they wished to spend their remaining time together alone. Since the third prince had now signified his allegiance with the fourth princess’s faction, he no longer had a place in the palace. He was apparently having to stay with his grandfather, Marquis Bergerac.

Regis had promised to send someone for Elize once the date of their deployment was decided. He was now heading to the dining hall, hastening down one of the villa's corridors, having run a tad late. It was as he hurried along that he noticed one of the doors up ahead was cracked open. Just as he passed it, a pale, slender hand shot out from the room beyond, grabbing the tactician by the sleeve.

"Huh?"

Regis was yanked into the room with far more strength than he would have expected from such a gangly limb. He tumbled to the floor with a cry as the door behind him was swiftly pushed shut.

What just happened?!

The room was small, used to house the servants of guests or keep their belongings. Someone had mounted him to keep him still, although they weren't as heavy as he had expected.

"Keep quiet," spoke a female voice. Regis needed a moment to regain his composure, but when he looked at the woman before him properly, he saw that she was a lavish-looking young lady with ghastly pale skin and hair.

"Ms. Jessica?!"

"Quiet."

"What's all this?"

Jessica was made up to look like a young noblewoman. Her dress—which was predominantly white—suited her well. She wouldn't look out of place in the villa, but her looks would perhaps attract the eyes of the men on the estate. Those of the Fourth Army had already been told who she was and that she was their ally for now, so there was little reason for her to forcefully meet him in secret like this.

Jessica sighed. "The Fourth Army's soldiers are on the prowl."

"Y-Yeah."

“They know I am with Renard Pendu.”

The day before, Regis had reunited with the Fourth Army with the mercenary brigade’s assistance. Doing this had prevented a confrontation with the First Army.

“I made sure to explain that you are on our side,” Regis said. “They truly understand, and I believe they are quite grateful for the assistance.”

“Perhaps on the surface, but you seem to have forgotten—we may have lost, but Renard Pendu killed a great many imperial soldiers in West La Frengé.”

“Right...”

She was referring to the battle during which Regis had artificially produced fog to devastate High Britannia’s supply unit. Although the Fourth Army had come out victorious, they had ended up losing far more troops than anticipated. He also remembered the surprise attack that Renard Pendu had launched on their headquarters.

Jessica carefully watched the door as heavy footsteps passed through the corridor. “I...cannot trust as easily as you do. Anyone who holds a grudge might choose to cut me down, should the opportunity present itself.”

“I chose veteran soldiers for the security detail. They’re rational men.”

“Far too many mercenaries have been strung along with such naive notions. At times, we may raise the flag of surrender or fake injury to disarm our foe. The more we deceive, the more cautious we become of getting deceived ourselves.”

“I see.”

“Say I pressed a blade to your throat right now—would that not make this whole ordeal so much quicker? I could force the princess to trade my brother for her tactician.”

“I’m sure she would indeed release Gilbert if you did that, but...what happens next? I believe we’ve already discussed this, but you would need to escape Belgarian pursuit while your reputation in its surrounding nations is at rock bottom. It’s a rather harsh situation to enter willingly—you do understand that, don’t you?”

“I do. That is why I formed this personal alliance with you.”

“That’s good to hear. Now, I would really appreciate you getting off of me.”

Regis didn’t think she was particularly heavy; the situation was just unsettling. It was bad enough that he was starting to feel the warmth of her body through his clothes, but being pushed down by a strong-willed woman was stirring up his past trauma and inducing a cold sweat.

“Since you have so graciously tested my memory, it seems only fair that I test yours,” Jessica said. “Your men are soon to relocate south, I hear...but is my brother not at Fort Volks in the exact opposite direction?” There was a hint of anger in her voice—quite a rare occurrence, as she scarcely ever let her emotions breach her cold facade.

“Hmm. I see...” Regis pondered the situation for a moment. “Renard Pendu has only seven hundred survivors—not enough to rescue Gilbert from Fort Volks—and so you decided to start by taking me hostage. After giving it a little thought, however, you’ve come to the conclusion that we’re better off working together.”

“Indeed. But only if my brother is saved as a result.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“I am unsure how things look to you, but our brigade is reaching its limit. Morale is low; we persist because my brother’s salvation is so near. Also, our members are not the most refined bunch. Camping right outside the capital among so many imperial soldiers is like toeing the edge of the gallows with the nooses already around our necks.”

“Are things really that bad...?”

“None of us trust the imperial soldiers. We never know when they might stab us in the back.” Jessica suddenly produced a small blade and pressed it against Regis’s neck. He couldn’t help but wonder where in her seemingly ordinary dress she had been hiding it.

“Answer me this, Regis d’Aurick... Have you deceived me?”

“I would never.”

“But you march south.”

“I never thought you’d feel this cornered. Fear not, though; I’ll take some measures to answer your expectations.”

“Another verbal promise?”

“The situation took a sudden turn only moments ago.”

“You already kept us waiting while you were scheming in the capital, Sir Aurick. Franziska was injured. How long must I obey you without being paid even a single copper coin?”

“Ah, when you put it like that... You’re fully justified to be angry at me. This is my fault.”

Jessica had saved Regis from Latrielle’s assassination attempt and aided him in crossing the mountains to escape the prince’s search efforts. She had supplied him with food, water, and shelter. She had guarded him. She had even exposed her troops to danger by advancing toward the Fourth Army—toward a military force that had been fully prepared for combat.

Imperial soldiers were paid wages, and the potential for awards and promotions incentivized hard work. Mercenaries, however, were moved only by payment and contract. They would also normally receive half of their contractual fee in advance.

“I understand your predicament,” Regis said, sounding rather troubled, “but it’s going to take us some time to muster together a sum that will satisfy you. The Fourth Army is short on funds, and while we are scheduled to receive money to cover the costs of the *généralissime*’s military council, it won’t arrive until next month at the earliest.”

“So you want me to wait even longer?”

“You’re going to have to trust me, but it’s not as though I haven’t done anything for you. Very soon, you’ll want to head south with us.”

“For what reason?”

Regis could feel the cold of the blade on his neck as Jessica’s face drew nearer and nearer. She was a pretty woman, as far as he could tell. It was usually hard to guess what was going through her mind, but it seemed she was growing emotional.

“I should have told you sooner...” Regis said. “I explained your situation to the princess. To repay you for saving me, she’s agreed to Gilbert’s release.”

Jessica’s eyes shot open. “I-Is that true?!”

“As I said...you’re going to have to trust me,” Regis replied. He hadn’t drafted any formal documents on the matter that he could use to back up his claim—something that Jessica quickly seemed to infer, as she looked very discontent.

“Why would you not put something so important down on paper? Are you saying that my brother’s treatment is not worth such effort?”

“When you and the Mercenary King discuss Renard Pendu’s next course of action, do you always document your plans?”

“There is no need.”

“The same is true for the princess and me,” Regis said. Upon hearing that, Jessica drew back the blade and finally allowed him to stand. “I really thought you were going to cut me,” he muttered, wiping away the sweat that was beading on his nape.

“This is a fake knife.”

“Huh?!”

Jessica pressed the apparent sharp edge against her hand. Just as she had claimed, it failed to draw even a single drop of blood. “Blades have never been my strong suit, and it would have been quite an issue had I stabbed you by mistake.”

“Then...don’t tell me your impulsive behavior was all an act.”

“I shall leave that to your imagination.”

Regis let out a sigh; she was back to her usual self. “I’ll send a letter to Gilbert,” he said. “I promise that he’s going to walk free, but what he does after that is up to him. I cannot guarantee that he’ll meet up with us.”

“...Of course.”

“Personally, I’m hoping he lends us his strength. That’s why I’ll add a request for him to head south as well,” Regis explained. He had no intention of sending a formal order, since he didn’t know whether Gilbert would even choose to join their side. His hope was that the Mercenary King would recognize the southern front as an opportunity to salvage his brigade’s reputation.

Jessica straightened her dress. It seemed that she believed him, at least for now. “If what you say is the truth, then you have my gratitude. Just do not forget our contract,” she said. In exchange for her personal cooperation, Regis had agreed to provide Renard Pendu with supplies.

“I’ll honor my promise,” Regis assured her. “Incidentally, are you going to join us for supper?”

“Sir Aurick... A noble would never invite a lowly mercenary to the table.”

“Are you sure?”

“Even if one did, it would only be uncomfortable for me. I refuse.”

“Well, I’m not going to force you.”

Jessica pointed at the door, as if demanding that he leave at once.

“Worse yet, entering the hall by your side would make me the target of Princess Argentina’s envy. I would hardly call that a fair trade.”



Regis had only intended to change his clothes, but now he had been gone for quite some time. He popped his head into the dining hall—a vast, intricate room, the walls of which were adorned with art and lined with servants. The centerpiece was a long, amber-colored table, at which Altina was seated in the farthest chair. He was sure that she would have started eating by now, but she had yet to be served. There were only wine glasses and bread on the table.

“Finally here, Regis!” Altina called out.

“U-Um... Were you by any chance...waiting for me?”

“Naturally. This is a celebration for the both of us, after all.”

“No, no, no... Princess, it is *not* natural for someone who is both royalty and the *généralissime* to wait for someone like me,” Regis

protested. He was speaking more formally than usual, since there were others he did not recognize sharing the table.

“Details, details. Just get over here.” She beckoned him to the chair to her right. Eric was standing behind her, having taken up the proposal to become the princess’s sharpshooter. He wasn’t holding a rifle, owing to the fact that they were currently inside, but instead carried a sword at his hip. He waved to Regis with a smile.

In the seat to Regis’s right was Fanrine, the master of the manor. “Is champagne all right with you, Regis?” she asked as soon as he sat down.

“Thank you.”

With a single glance, she signaled the sommelier to pour Regis a drink. The clear, golden liquid bubbled up toward the rim of the glass.

Eddie was seated to Altina’s left. Because he was inside and there were other guards present, he hadn’t brought his sword. Beside him was Abidal-Evra, now the leader of an order of knights. He looked ready to fight at a moment’s notice, perhaps because he recognized the imperial capital as enemy territory.

In the final seat, across from Altina at the opposite end of the long table, sat a gentleman who appeared to be in his early thirties. He was dressed as gracefully as one would expect of a noble, his reddish-brown hair was swept back, and his eyebrows and mustache were so well groomed that he looked as though he had stepped out of a portrait. Upon meeting Regis’s gaze, he courteously bowed his head. “Congratulations on your promotion to first-grade administrative officer, Sir Aurick.”

“...Thank you.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gauchen. Count Gauchen, if you will. I work under Minister Berard as a director of military affairs.”

“He’s my superior,” Fanrine noted. The director was a top-level position within the Ministry that managed many different people. Considering the man’s age and peerage, he had risen through the ranks at considerable speed. Either he had connections in the right places or was simply that good at his job.

Did Fanrine invite him here? Regis wondered. If so, what for? Before he could consider the matter much further, however, the maids began serving their food.

“A toast!” Altina declared as she raised her glass.

“A toast to *Généralissime* Argentina’s appointment and Regis’s promotion,” Fanrine replied as the organizer of the celebration.

All those gathered cheered in unison. Regis likewise held up his glass before taking a mouthful of sparkling wine. It was sweet and fragrant, and the bubbles rolled pleasantly over his tongue. This was the sort of champagne he would expect to enjoy over a vibrant tune.

“Ah... This is quite nice.”

“It’s the pride of our house,” Fanrine boasted. “We only make thirty bottles a year.”

“You opened something so valuable?”

House Tirasio Laverde managed a number of wineries, and their wine was highly praised. Regis turned his attention back to Gauchen, whose glass was already empty. “Yes, what wonderful champagne it is,” the director said. “The flavor and fragrance are magnificent, but more so, this clarity—this *transparency*. If only our organization were the same.”

“Is it not transparent already?” Regis asked.

Gauchen shook his head. “I begged to be allowed a seat at this feast. I knew I simply had to speak with Her Highness and her officers before she held a military council.”

“I leave the complicated details to Regis,” Altina replied, waving the remark off dismissively.

“Uh... Princess...” Regis tried to interject.

“I’m learning a lot, but the more I learn, the more I realize just how incredible you are, Regis. I’m going to pay close attention to the discussion, but I’ll leave the actual talking to you.”

“I...see.”

Eddie took his fork and immediately went for one of the dishes that had just been brought in. “Seeing as you’re busy with all that, I’m laying claim to this meat!”

“I’m going to eat too!” Altina protested.

Do you really need to scramble like that? They’re serving more than any one person could possibly eat. Regis heaved a slight sigh before returning to his discussion partner, who seemed entirely unfazed by the spectacle. “Count Gauchen, has Emperor Latrielle informed you of his plans for the Ministry of Military Affairs?”

“He’s been talking about dismantling it for quite some time now, since before the late emperor passed away.”

“Since that long ago?!”

“Be it in intelligence gathering or weapon procurement, His Majesty—well, he was the marshal general then—feared we were falling behind the other nations.”

“And those worries were realized during the war against High Britannia.”

“We suffered great enough losses for him to reach a decision.”

“Still, dismantling it entirely? I understand that he’s taking its authority away, but I never thought he’d go that far...”

“Minister Berard is going to be transferred to the Ministry of Ceremonies, from what I’ve heard.”

“So the current Minister Bergerac is retiring?”

“He *has* gotten on in years.”

Being able to preside over the coronation ceremony of a new emperor before one’s retirement was considered a great honor. To be forced to retire at the peak of his career, perhaps this had to do with his grandson, Third Prince Bastian, voicing support for Fourth Princess Argentina’s faction. Regis purposely refrained from speculating on the matter, though.

“What about the others?”

“Most of us will probably lose our jobs.”

“And...you’re okay with that?”

Gauchen cracked a faint smile. “Not even Minister Berard is satisfied, since he’s going to have far less authority than he has now as the minister of military affairs. To make matters worse for him, His Majesty has already declared his intent to reduce the scale of ceremonies henceforth.”

“Then it’s effectively a demotion.”

“Correct. Now, as for the other high-ranking officials... You might be able to guess how they’re taking the news.”

“I assume they aren’t happy about losing their jobs.”

“They’re furious. Why should they be dismissed when they carried out their work exactly as their predecessors carried out theirs? That seems to be the question on everybody’s lips.”

“So they consider themselves without fault?”

“Correct.”

“Hmm... It’s certainly true that the Ministry hasn’t seen any notable advancements over the past few decades.”

“And if certain practices have already held for a hundred years, one would normally expect them to hold for a hundred more.”

“Not anymore.”

“Indeed. An influx of technology from the east has resulted in the development of new materials and inventions, putting both industry and the military on the path of reform. I believe we are at a turning point in history.”

“I can’t say I disagree.”

“Sir Aurick, how do you see the times to come?”

“I’m certain His Majesty will expand the war fronts. At the very least, we can expect Belgaria to launch a counteroffensive against High Britannia and Germania, since it hasn’t been a year since they invaded us. Against the south too, I guess.”

“So we’re going to invade them...”

“The imperial army will mass-produce the newest line of rifles and cannons, and war will take on a completely new form. Once guns capable of consecutive fire are made, a lowly foot soldier will easily overpower a mounted knight,” Regis noted. His explanation earned him a bewildered stare from Abidal-Evra, who was himself responsible for an order of mounted knights. “I’m talking about the future, though. And we’re going to be ready for it by then.”

Gauchen cocked his head. “In other words, the Empire is proceeding down the path of hegemony?”

“It has gone through such periods before.”

“And what lies beyond it...?”

Regis stared into the director's eyes, trying to determine how much he could safely reveal and whether the man could really be trusted. He was here on an invitation from Fanrine, so he probably wasn't in Latrielle's faction, but...

"Had I thought he was going to succeed, I wouldn't have fought him for the throne!" Altina said through a mouthful of meat, making no attempt to hide her true feelings on the subject.

Regis stifled a sigh, keeping his focus on Gauchen. "To put it simply, His Majesty and I do not share the same outlook of the future." He couldn't just outright say that he thought the Empire was going to lose.

Gauchen nodded. "You really are unlike any other soldier, Sir Aurick."

"Yes, I'm well aware. I can't swing a sword, nor can I ride a horse..."

"That's not what I... In any case, I am in awe of your foresight."

"Are you really?"

Instead of answering this, Gauchen changed the topic. "Although I may hold the peerage of a count, I am but a poor noble from the countryside. I always felt ashamed and out of place at the Ministry. My standing would have a good amount of trouble hoisted onto me, and because of this, I have seen, heard, and learned many things."

Fanrine nodded. She refrained from intruding when men were speaking on matters of politics, as was common practice for the daughter of a noble house, but it was clear from her expression that she recognized Gauchen's talents. The Ministry of Military Affairs was being dismantled, Berard was being transferred to the Ministry of Ceremonies, and most were losing their jobs...yet he was focusing the conversation on the future. There were a few possible reasons why Fanrine had agreed to his attendance, and to Regis, those reasons were becoming increasingly clear.

“The *généralissime*’s military council will need to fulfill many of the same roles as the dissolving Ministry of Military Affairs,” Regis said. “However, the Fourth Army faces a terrible shortage of clerical workers.”

“I am aware,” the director replied.

“Count Gauchen...might you be able to address some of these issues?”

“I shall do whatever I can.”

In order to help the short-staffed Fourth Army, Fanrine had welcomed Gauchen as a connection to the crumbling ministry. Of course, one had to keep in mind that it was being dismantled for all its internal shortcomings; many of its members wouldn’t make beneficial additions to the team. Some careful discernment was therefore in order—discernment that Regis would need to carry out. Was Gauchen really as competent as he seemed to be? Was he someone who would help Altina, even in the times to come?

To find out, Regis decided to pose his question to the director.



“To Emperor Latrielle, Princess Argentina and the Fourth Army are like a double-edged sword. She is a necessary component of his military conquest, but her ideals oppose his own, and he cannot cast aside the possibility that she might raise a rebellion,” Regis said. *Not that we intend to do anything at the moment...*

“It’s not like my goal is to overthrow Latrielle or start a civil war,” Altina noted. “In fact, I want war to disappear from the world entirely.”

“Either way, he’s going to treat us as cautiously as one would a starving bloodhound. We were almost on the verge of civil war just the other day.”

“It’s his own fault for sending such an insulting report!”

“I admit, he was a tad overbearing.” The last document Latrielle had sent in his official capacity as marshal general was an apology for a false report, not that it mattered much now that he had taken the throne. “Emperor Latrielle would have cut down the Fourth Army’s forces if doing so were an option. He went as far as to plot my assassination, after all.”

“So it’s true...” Gauchen said, not seeming the least bit surprised.

“You knew?”

“There’s a rumor going around. How could the chief strategy advisor possibly have been killed after a successful siege...? Anyone versed in military affairs would suspect foul play.”

“Well, that sounds about right.”

“You are a national hero, Sir Aurick. I am glad you are alive and well.”

“I appreciate your kind words... Now then, I think I’ve drawn out my preface to this question long enough. Sir Gauchen.”

The director sat up straight as Eddie and Altina turned to face him.

“Ask away.”

“Despite his desire to deplete the Fourth Army’s forces, Emperor Latrielle instead bestowed the princess with a historic level of authority. Do you have any idea why he might have done such a thing?” Regis asked.

“Hmm...” Gauchen placed a contemplative hand on his chin. “You’re asking me for a reason...?”

Regis glanced at Abidal-Evra and then Eddie. “Does anyone else have any ideas?” he asked.

Abidal-Evra was the first to raise his hand. “Perhaps, after concluding that making an enemy of a certain tactician is much too dangerous, he decided to give us better treatment to prevent an uprising.”

“So he’s placating us? As a statesman, trying to make us more loyal would be an appropriate move,” Regis mused, “but someone who would make such concessions for a single subordinate stands no chance at world conquest. His Majesty understands this, and to be frank, he is the very personification of obstinacy.”

Abidal-Evra nodded his understanding. “I see... He wouldn’t want anyone to think he’s buttering up the princess.”

Eddie was the next one to offer an explanation. “He did it ’cause he thinks it’s necessary, right? While the Fourth Army handles the north, east, and south, he can protect the capital, muster his forces, and attack either High Britannia or Langobarti. Someone’s gotta do the job, seeing as the Ministry’s not reliable enough.”

“So he failed to weaken us and now he’s reversing his policy. He needs a pawn, so it might as well be a strong one. Am I understanding that right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Not a bad idea, but that leaves the possibility of the Fourth Army turning right around and invading the capital instead. How would he deal with that?”

“Hmm... Guess he’d cut down whoever opposes him.”

“So he made the decision knowing that it might come to a civil war. Somewhat of a stretch, but I think we’re getting close.”

“For crying out loud, that isn’t going to happen!” Altina cried out, rising from her seat. “I’m not starting a civil war!”

“Of course,” Regis said, “but we’re trying to think like Emperor Latrielle.”

“He’s making a fool out of me. He always has! I’m sure he thinks I’ll never win, no matter how many soldiers he gives me.”

“That’s not quite how I see it...” Regis murmured. On the contrary, Latrielle’s response seemed to suggest that he very much recognized the princess’s strengths. The rank of *généralissime* granted Altina command over almost half of the Belgian Army; if she faced a crushing defeat, it would plunge the entire nation into crisis. He wouldn’t have invested so much funding or placed so much trust in her unless his expectations were high.

Fanrine offered no answer to Regis’s question. Gauchen, however, finally raised a hand. “I consider it an undeniable fact that a *généralissime* is needed to support the northern, eastern, and southern fronts,” he said. “The Sixth and Eighth Armies would not follow a mere general.”

Altina had initially been appointed to Fort Sierck as a major general—one rank above its former commander, the Black Knight Jerome, who was a brigadier general. She also surpassed him in peerage and was operating under a decree from the Ministry itself...yet the officers and soldiers still refused to follow her. She would most likely encounter the same problem if she marched south, but this time, she didn’t have the leisure to prove herself with a duel.

The princess balled her hands into tight fists. She was wearing a smile, but the fury emanating from her was overpowering. “So, the Ministry decided to send me north knowing that Jerome wouldn’t listen to a word I said... Can I punch you?”

Gauchen recoiled at once. “I-I was not involved with that assignment,” he stammered.

“Now, now...” Regis attempted to pacify Altina. “Remember, all sorts of roles make up the Ministry. It’s also a different story now that

you're the *généralissime*; if a commander refuses to follow you, then you can just dismiss them."

"I can do that?!" Altina cried out, her eyes shooting open.

Regis nodded. "Think about it like this: you can essentially do anything the Ministry was able to do before."

"That said, dismissing a commander means losing access to the private noble army at the core of their unit," Gauchen added.

"Yeah, that makes sense..." Altina said. "Ah, the Beilschmidt border regiment is Jerome's noble army, right?"

"Even if you had been able to dismiss him back then, not a single soldier would have opted to stay with you," Regis noted. The response would probably be less extreme for the Sixth and Eighth Armies, since they weren't entirely noble-owned, but dismissing their commanders didn't seem like a good move from a strategic standpoint.

"Hmm... Still, I would much rather dismiss my opponents than have to duel them."

"Of course."

"I believe His Majesty handed over the *Généralissime*'s Baton out of absolute necessity," Gauchen said, getting the conversation back on track.

Eddie cheered. "So I was right!"

"But after giving the princess that much authority, how do you think he will deal with our potential rebellion?" Regis asked.

Gauchen was calm as he answered. "Emperor Latrielle has begun the mass production of the new firearms. A great number will already be in the hands of our armies by the time the southern front has settled down." The First Army, which was already said to be the Empire's

strongest force, would similarly be equipped with the strongest weapons.

“I definitely wouldn’t want to go up against that...” Abidal-Evra groaned.

“Indeed,” Regis said. “It is precisely because war will change forever that Emperor Latrielle so generously handed over the baton.”

“Then what if our unit had rifles too?” Altina asked, looking at her tactician quizzically.

“Our unit *will* have rifles. Emperor Latrielle needs to supply guns and cannons to all the armies under him, otherwise we won’t be able to overwhelm the other nations.”

“Hmm?” She was naturally perplexed.

“Still, I understand what you mean, Princess. If you rebelled with the guns he gave you, he would certainly lose the advantage.”

“Right! Not that I’m actually going to rebel, of course! You’re not going to say he trusts me, are you?”

Regis couldn’t help but laugh at the very suggestion. “Definitely not,” he said.

Altina merely humphed in response, but Gauchen looked completely taken aback. This reaction didn’t come as much of a surprise, considering that Regis had just responded to the woman who was both the Empire’s fourth princess *and* the *généralissime* in a less than courteous manner.

Whoops... Regis moved a hand to cover his mouth. “Um, there’s something about rifles that makes them very different from any other weapon we’ve encountered so far.”

Altina barely needed to ponder the situation before she leaned forward in realization. “Ah, the supply line!” she exclaimed.

“That’s right! Amazing! You really have grown!”

“Oho ho! Praise me more, why don’t you!”

Eddie folded his arms and cocked his head to one side. “Hmm? Supply line?” he asked.

“Guns require ammunition,” Regis explained, “and Emperor Latrielle intends to hold a complete monopoly on its production.”

“Ah... So that’s where this is going. I totally understand.”

Regis was starting to feel a little anxious, but he pressed on nonetheless. “The emperor intends to prevent rebellion by making it so that guns and ammunition can only be obtained through the state. He’s thought beyond that as well,” he said. Indeed, Latrielle’s plan was to dismantle and nationalize the noble armies. “As for the *Généralissime*’s Baton, assuming he is going to take it back at some point, I can see why he was so willing to hand it over.”

“Is that how it is?!” Altina puffed out her cheeks.

Gauchen sighed. “Hardly anyone in the Ministry or among the nobility has been able to piece that together. As expected of you, Sir Aurick.”

“It looks like you’ve also figured it out though, Sir Gauchen. Have you told any of the other nobles?” Regis asked.

“Hah... Nobles are a proud sort. They believe without a doubt that the world exists for their own sake. Like innocent children, they assume the new emperor could never take away their special privileges. That which has lasted a hundred years is sure to last a hundred more—if anyone tried to tell them otherwise, they’d respond only with laughter.”

“Makes sense.”

“It’s all a farce.”

“Dismantling the Ministry is most likely a stepping-stone toward something far greater,” Regis said. He could guess that Latrielle wanted to keep the nobles from having free access to the new guns, which was precisely why he was removing Minister Berard from his position of authority. Gauchen seemed to suspect this as well; at least in terms of perception, he came across as reliable enough. “Now, one last question...”

“Whatever you need.”

“I want to hear your opinion on *that* rumor about His Majesty.” Regis was, of course, referring to the allegation that Latrielle had murdered the late emperor. It was a bold request, delivered with a completely unreadable expression.

Gauchen’s breath caught in his throat. Former political rival or not, the princess before him was still the younger sister of the nation’s standing ruler; one careless statement could result in him being tried for *lèse-majesté* or treason. After a moment spent in silence, however, he smiled. “Could you take the fact that I am here rather than at the palace banquet as my answer?”

Regis turned to Altina. “Princess, I strongly recommend inviting Sir Gauchen to your council as an administrative officer. Take him and those he recommends.”

“You think so?” the princess asked. “Well, if you insist. I’m going to be counting on you, Gauchen!” she said with a smile.

The director stood at once and returned a perfect salute. “I gratefully accept! Please, leave everything to me!”

“Thank God we’ve finally found someone willing to work under those horrendous conditions...” Altina muttered.

“Ah. That reminds me...” Regis said. “I forgot to mention this, Sir Gauchen, but you should know that I haven’t had a single day off

since I was assigned here last year. It's a pleasure to be working with you."

"H-Huh?!" the director sputtered.

Final Chapter: Marching South

A week later—

On August 20th, in the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, *Généralissime* Marie Quatre Argentina departed from Verseilles with her army. Her forces stretched far and wide down the road, moving in strict lines. They numbered eight thousand men—five hundred cavalry and four thousand infantry she had brought from Fort Volks, alongside fifteen hundred troops of the standing army that hailed from the south and two thousand hired mercenaries.

“It’s been a while...” Regis observed from where he was sitting inside his white carriage.

“It really has,” Clarisse replied. She was sitting across from him and was the only other person in the carriage; Altina rode her trusty steed Caracarla at the front of the officers, Eddie and Eric took up her flanks, and Abidal-Evra took command of the knights that made up the very front of their formation.

Renard Pendu were marching at the rear, although they had yet to sign a contract of any kind. They were merely taking the same route, trusting Regis’s claim that Gilbert would appear in the south. The week that had passed since Regis sent correspondence to Fort Volks was not enough time for him to receive a response, so he knew not what the Mercenary King intended to do.

Jessica, the mercenaries’ proxy leader, was bringing along her ten-year-old sister Martina. Franziska was taking a rather long time to recover from her wounds, perhaps owing to a lack of nutrition, so she remained in the capital. Bastian had said that he would look after her.

Farther back in their formation, Elize was riding in a separate carriage. During times of war, it was customary for guests to stay

closer to the rear, while military carriages remained at the center—at least, that was the official reason Regis had given. In truth, he had a rather good idea who she really was and was sectioning her off so that nobody else would notice—and so that he would not end up divulging any unnecessary information.

“She seemed quite reluctant to part,” Clarisse remarked with a glance toward the capital.

“Hmm? Oh, you mean Ms. Fanrine. Well, we *have* been through a lot together...” Regis replied. She had endured so much just for being in close proximity to him. She had nearly been assassinated, she had gotten swords pointed at her, and she had needed to walk several days through untamed mountains. Regis thought the greater mystery was how she was not yet sick and tired of him.

“I see. A lot, huh?” Clarisse asked, her eyes narrowed.

“I won’t deny it.”

“Like your time spent parading around in women’s clothing, perhaps?”

“Urk... I would really appreciate it if you could forget about that.”

“Memories are only overwritten by even stronger ones, Mr. Regis.”

Regis paused. “What exactly do you intend to do to me, Ms. Clarisse?”

“What are your thoughts on a maid outfit?”

“Cross-dressing is far from a hobby of mine.”

“I’m only joking.”

“I won’t wear a dress either.”

Clarisse must have been expecting that response, as her eyes nonchalantly shifted to the window. “A shame... All of my preparations have gone to waste, then.”

“You went and bought something?!” Regis exclaimed. He had suspected that something was awry; the space on the carriage roof was meant for Altina’s personal belongings, but they were carrying a concerning amount of unnecessary luggage as well. “I-In any case, I’m glad Ms. Fanrine was able to join the *généralissime*’s council; she’s good at her job, plus she has such a broad social network.”

The clerical workers of the council were going to have their work cut out for them for quite some time—people, goods, and information tended to orbit around the capital, after all. Regis had worried that they would find themselves without a base of operations, since their rooms in the palace were now going to the officers of the First Army, but Gauchen had managed to pin down the abandoned estate of a fallen noble for them to use. The council were now going to handle the Fourth Army’s office work that had fallen completely by the wayside in Regis’s absence, and to this end, they had hired around five hundred former officials from the now-defunct Ministry of Military Affairs. Most were commoners, or nobles who were not succeeding their houses, and they were all rather young.

Considering that the council was taking on the work of an organization that had once been four times its size, it was operating at quite the deficit. Gauchen had insisted that they had enough people, however, so Regis intended to leave things to them for the time being. As the only active first-grade without any direct subordinates, he recognized that he needed to learn how to delegate.

“Incidentally...” Clarisse looked back at Regis. “Have you sent a letter home?”

“I haven’t, no. Has Enzo returned yet?”

“No, he’s still at Fort Volks. At least, he was when we left.”

“Is that all right? He’s been away for quite a while...”

“Are *you* all right, Mr. Regis?”

There was something about Clarisse’s line of questioning that caught Regis’s attention. He tried giving the situation some thought, wondering what might have happened since his separation from Altina that would concern his sister.

“Ah!” he suddenly cried out. “She doesn’t still think I’m dead, does she?!”

Clarisse nodded in response.

“Oh no...” Regis put his head in his hands. His body—no, not his body, but the body of a complete stranger—had no doubt been sent to his sister along with his belongings. “I hadn’t even considered the procedures that followed my apparent death. Ah, but they would at least inform her of the mistake, wouldn’t they?”

“‘They’? Who are you referring to, exactly?”

“Well, the ones who issued the notice, of course... Wait, the Ministry’s gone now!” Logistics, wages, and promotions were now the responsibility of the First Army and the *généralissime*’s council, but what about the other branches? Specifically, who was going to rescind his death? Regis broke into a cold sweat. “Sh-She’s going to kill me! There isn’t much we can do about the misinformation, but I’ve had over a week to contact her! Paper... I need paper...”

“Please calm down, Mr. Regis.”

“Y-Yes. Calm.”

“There are times when it is simply too late.”

“You’re not being very reassuring!” Regis snapped. He could already picture the fury that would doubtless blaze in his sister’s eyes the next time they met, and the thought alone sent him into a panicked frenzy. He scribbled away on some paper, trying to keep his hand steady as the carriage rattled along the road.

Clarisse watched over the flustered tactician, looking contrastingly serene.

“Y-Yes?” Regis asked.

“I’m just glad that you’re finally back, Mr. Regis.”

“I guess you won’t be bored now that you have someone to tease again.”

“Oh my... I do have genuine emotions, you know. My dear one is back safe and sound.”

“There you go again...” Regis sighed. He waited for the punch line, suspecting that this was another trap of some kind, but Clarisse simply stared into his eyes.

“Oho ho... What’s the matter, Mr. Regis? Are you hoping for something sweeter? I do have some sugar candy.”

“Ah, no... Wait, where was the punch line?”

“There wasn’t one. You’re dear to me, and it really is nice to have you back.”

“Huh...”

“Would it be too much to ask for you to be a little happier about our reunion?”

“Ah, right. I’m very glad to be back too.”

“How delightful.”

Regis waited a little while longer, but still, Clarisse did not tease him. Instead, she continued to stare, her cheeks a faint shade of red. Regis could feel his face heating up as well, and the palpable awkwardness forced him to return to his half-finished letter. His hand was uneasy, and not just because of the shaking of the carriage.

“Err... Ms. Clarisse... You’re making me a little uncomfortable.”

“You’ll need to put up with it, I’m afraid. How much do you think I worried about you, Mr. Regis? I treasure you dearly.”

“Oh, umm...”

In the end, Regis found himself unable to write another word. As he sat in the white carriage across from the blushing maid, he felt as though his mind were slowly deteriorating.



Three days since the march began—

It was afternoon when the reconnaissance report came in. A merchant from a northbound caravan was apparently requesting an audience.

Regis folded his arms. “Hmm... We really don’t have time for a business discussion, but if they’ve come from the south, we might get some information about the war. All right, we’ll meet them. Could you ask the princess for a thirty-minute break?”

“Understood!” the messenger replied with a salute.

Regis had also instructed for the merchant to be brought to the main camp so that he could speak to the man alone. He saw no reason to involve the princess, since she was tired from the journey and normally left business discussions to him anyway.

A short while passed before a woman appeared between the ranks of soldiers. Her hair was long and dark like flowing ink, and she wore a jet-black dress. The messenger had mentioned the request coming from a merchant, so Regis had naturally assumed that he was meeting with a man. On the contrary, his visitor was quite the charming woman. Accompanying her was a girl wearing a white dress and carrying a lace parasol, which she used to shield the lady from the sun. She wasn’t dressed as a maid, but she was quite young for an attendant.

A more pressing concern, however, was that the woman claiming to be a merchant was walking around completely empty-handed. She looked more like a noble on a stroll than anything else, so why had the scout reported that she was a merchant?

The woman lifted the dark veil from over her face and gazed at Regis with obsidian eyes. “Looks like you really did make it out alive,” she said. Her voice was bewitching, but somewhat masculine.



Regis's breath caught in his throat. "Mrs. Elenore?!"

She was Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasio Laverde, daughter of a ducal house and the famous Vixen of the South. Regis had wondered about her absence during the ceremony and the banquet the week before, but never had he expected to come across her here.

"Regis," Elenore said, her voice quavering. "It pains me to make a request like this when we haven't seen each other in so long..."

"What's wrong?"

"Please, help us."

A fierce gust of wind swept through just as Elenore made her appeal, sweeping the young girl's parasol into the sky.

Short Story: The Black Knight and the Sacrificial Fort

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt had dark hair and dark eyes. He rode a black horse, wore black armor, and was undefeated on the battlefield. Those who had seen him or heard talk of his accomplishments knew him as the man who struck fear into the hearts of all men, whether they were friend or foe. They knew him as the revered Black Knight.

Imperial Year 851, July 1st—

A detachment of the Fourth Army departed for an eastern fort with the remnants of the Seventh Army. They numbered thirteen thousand in total, which was impressive for a military force, but nowhere near enough to support the eastern front. Brigadier General Coigniera commanded eight thousand soldiers of the Seventh Army, Lieutenant General Benjamin led the forty-five hundred remnants of the Second Army, while Major General Jerome headed the five hundred horsemen of the Black Knight Brigade.

The sun made its way toward the western horizon as the soldiers proceeded along a road through the trees. A newly appointed knight rode up beside Jerome's black horse at the head of the stretched-out formation.

"Life sure is full of twists and turns..."

Jerome scoffed at the muttering knight, one Holger Orjes. "Are you complaining to me?" he asked.

"Not at all. Those are my honest thoughts, is all. I never thought I would ride my horse alongside a Belgian hero such as yourself—or have my own subordinates, for that matter."

"Funny how things work out."

“Just half a year ago, I was a mercenary working for Varden, stationed at Fort Volks.”

Before the Beilschmidt border regiment had captured the impregnable fortress, Holger had been taken prisoner for information. Then, after the fortress was taken, he had been among those who requested to change sides. Granted, Varden might have hanged a mercenary whose loyalty was already suspect...

“Trash or not, I’ll make use of anyone with value,” Jerome replied simply. He had no interest in where the man was from.

Holger chuckled. “Well, the old commanders are no longer with the unit. I understand that I’m only here because you’re shorthanded.” Krueger had died in battle, and Abidal-Evra was protecting the princess, so it was true that the army was in need of capable commanders.

“We’ve replenished our numbers. Problem is, they’re all trash,” Jerome spat.

“When I was surrounded by barbarians, I was prepared to be skinned and eaten alive...” Holger remarked with a shrug.

“You must’ve fallen into Regis’s trap.”

“Indeed. He got me hook, line, and sinker. It used to frustrate me, but I’ve since gotten over it.”

“Oh?”

“I witnessed his battles against the Empire’s First Army and the High Britannian Royal Army firsthand. An oil-drenched field set ablaze, ships weaponized with gunpowder, a cavalry charge through the thick fog... I know now that I must have been blessed by the god of good fortune. My fate could have been much, much worse.”

There was definite truth to Holger's words—not all those on the receiving end of the tactician's schemes had been fortunate enough to walk away with their lives.

"Well, I can't stand it," Jerome grumbled. "A war is best won with a formidable foe at the end of your lance. Regis's plans better resemble the work of a con artist."

"Aha... In any case, I was thinking about how peculiar this whole situation is, especially for a failed knight such as myself."

Despite having been born into a knightly house, Holger ended up a mercenary at twenty years of age when his homeland fell to one of Germania's many civil wars. The commander training he had undergone had given him an advantage, since he was able to lead men, and the many places he had traveled to as a mercenary had made him more collected and experienced than many soldiers in the Belgarian Army. Jerome was not one to give out praise, but talented commanders were extremely valuable. The tough life that Holger spoke of was a fortunate thing for the regiment.

Holger pointed ahead. "I see walls, Sir Jerome."

"Hmm..."

"That must be Marschedt, the fortified city serving as the headquarters of the eastern front."

It was a beautiful walled city situated among an expanse of wheat fields. Both the ramparts and the fortress itself were made of white stone, a specialty of the region, and they towered as high as one would expect of a stronghold made to endure battle after battle. It may not have been as magnificent as Fort Volks, but it was large enough to house around forty thousand soldiers and a hundred thousand civilians.

"The ground is level enough that we can use our horses to the fullest," Jerome noted.

“My understanding is that the Seventh Army specializes in close-formation charges. We can use that to our advantage here.”

To these two men of war, the city’s beautifully maintained fields were nothing more than another battlefield to conquer.



The unit arrived at the fortress just before sunset, and a war council was held prior to dinner. Their seating arrangement around the long table was based on rank, for what it was worth. Benjamin was seated farther back than anyone else, with his younger brother and adjutant, Justin, to his right. Next was Coigniera, who had effectively become the commander of the Seventh Army. Jerome was keeping as far away from the others as he could, with Holger tagging along as his deputy officer.

“First, let us go over the state of our army.”

Coigniera was the first to speak, having opted to take charge of the meeting. He had once been a narrow-minded man who had spoken cynically when sent as a messenger to the Beilschmidt border regiment. It seemed that he had grown somewhat after experiencing a nightmarish defeat, being shouldered with the responsibility of commanding the Seventh Army and taking part in a battle where the very fate of the Empire was at stake.

Far from his previous arrogance, Coigniera now exuded a far more composed air. His new demeanor made him seem somewhat similar to Regis; indeed, even the way he passed out his premade documents and the gestures he made as he explained them closely resembled the tactician. Perhaps he had come to respect the nation’s hero.

“The Seventh Army kept five thousand soldiers here in Marschedt before joining the fight against the High Britannians. Two thousand are at this fort, while the remaining three thousand are at other key

points. We have with us an additional thirteen thousand. Now, considering that the Seventh Army originally marched out with twenty-one thousand, this is quite the decrease...but I think we have just barely enough to hold the line. There are eight thousand foot soldiers of the Seventh Army, forty-five hundred under Sir Benjamin—”

“Incompetent lout,” Jerome snarled. “You lost more men.”

“N-No, we were taken by surprise in unfamiliar lands...” Benjamin stammered, nervously dabbing at his brow with a handkerchief. His infantry unit had fallen victim to an attack by an unknown enemy during the march, ultimately costing him close to a thousand soldiers. Not all of these men had died; many were just injured and would recover eventually, but it was accurate to say that they no longer had access to around twenty percent of their available forces.

“Hmph. How many times did Regis warn you of an ambush there?” Jerome asked, his voice taking on a more mocking tone. “You can hardly call it a surprise attack given how much you were cautioned.”

In an unfortunate development, the tactician’s advice had fallen on deaf ears. Benjamin had received the information, but he hadn’t understood how to prepare for it accordingly.

“Now, now...” Coigniera intervened, trying to mediate. “Let’s just be more cautious henceforth.”

“Tsk...”

It was frustrating to say the least, but there was nobody else around capable of commanding forty-five hundred soldiers. Jerome’s subordinates could command perhaps one or two hundred at most; their voices would never reach more than a thousand. By that point, the forces in question were no longer a group but an organization. Regis was special in that he could seemingly cope no matter how many soldiers he was given. Jerome could not entrust the job to

anyone who had not received special education, and incompetent as he was, Benjamin was a noble who had received formal training as a commander.

“Benjamin.” Jerome made sure that each syllable of the man’s name was spoken with perfect clarity, as if wanting to carve each one into his head. “Your rank came with your peerage. Throw away any conceit you had as a lieutenant general this very instant. You must be aware of your own incompetence. Follow orders.”

“What?! But...”

“You’re the highest-ranked person here *and* the most incompetent. We stood on the same battlefield, yet you were the only one to lose soldiers.”

“Urgh...”

“Coignièra is more familiar with the terrain here, while I’m better at moving troops. As for you...”

“I may have lost soldiers, but military regulations state—”

“Regulations that lose us wars can eat shit. Flaunt your undeserved rank again and you can say farewell to that irksome hair of yours!”

“‘Undeserved’?! Such insolence toward your commanding officer!”

Jerome swung his left arm with such speed that no other man in the room was able to follow it. Only when they heard the dull *thud* of a dagger stabbing into the far wall did they realize what had just happened, and as for Benjamin...

“Waaah?!”

The blade had grazed his head, leaving a bald streak in its wake.

“Heed my warning—once you’ve got no more hair to cut, I’ll go for your neck,” Jerome growled, staring at Benjamin with the sharp eyes of a hungry wolf. “Watch your tongue.”

“Grr... This is insurrection!”

“Hmph. If you want an insurrection, I’ll gladly oblige.”

“Y-You may have the Black Knight Brigade, but we outnumber you tenfold.”

A devilish grin played on Jerome’s lips. “I won’t even need my brigade. Are you going to send out an order to kill the Black Knight over a personal grudge? Just try it and see who the men point their spears at.” Soldiers were far from being obedient chess pieces; they could disobey unreasonable orders, and many saw no merit in serving a commander who continued to fail. Before Benjamin could retort, however, Holger raised a hand.

“My apologies, but...the order that our commander Marie Quatre Argentina received was for the Fourth Army to *support* the Seventh. In which case, doesn’t that place us under the command of the Seventh Army?”

“Hmm...” Benjamin’s expression turned pensive. The blood was rushing to his head, but he understood that crossing swords with the Black Knight himself was a death wish. He needed an escape that would preserve his honor, and this was precisely that. “C-Certainly. It is just as the knight says: Her Highness’s will is absolute. I will entrust our policies to Sir Coignière.”

“Thank you,” Coignière said with an appreciative nod.

Jerome let out a tired sigh, unable to see the knight as anything more than a buffoon. What point was there in saving face when nobody else was present? Benjamin was a stereotypical high noble; he instinctively valued authority over logic.

Coignière may not have been anywhere near as skilled as that tactician, but he was no fool—he knew that a war could not be won on authority alone, and he was smart enough to suspect a surprise attack. With that in mind, no matter the particulars of their

circumstances, he was safer having Benjamin under his command than not.



Coignière spread a map over the table before lining it with wooden pieces. “As I’m sure you’re aware, tensions are escalating on the eastern front,” he said. “Our neighbors were always ready to invade if we provided so much as the slightest opportunity. We’ve had a number of minor engagements these past few years, although we achieved a tentative truce when His Majesty married the princess of Estaburg.”

There were many suspicious details surrounding the sudden death of Sixth Consort Juhaprecia Octovia, so it stood to reason that Estaburg was especially raring to fight. Presumably, the force that had attacked Benjamin’s unit was under their employ.

Jerome glared at the map. “What are we working with here?”

“There are two thousand soldiers of the Seventh Army stationed in Marschedt. The outer walls are sturdy and armed with plenty of mounted arbalests alongside a limited number of cannons. We have enough stockpiled to sustain thirty thousand soldiers and fifty thousand civilians for half a year. We can draw water from the well and reservoir within the city, and our combat supplies encompass more than just weapons and oil—we have books and instruments as well.”

Jerome nodded. “Not bad.” Their forces totaled the two thousand stationed there plus the thirteen thousand they had brought with them. He was personally against passive strategies like waiting out a siege, but he would do what was necessary, and their preparations seemed sufficient. His eyes shifted toward the enemy.

“There are many small nations dotting the east,” Coignière continued, pointing at the map to illustrate his point, “but not a

single one has engaged us more than Estaburg.” It was a large territory with a powerful army—at least, in comparison to its neighbors. Perhaps it would have conquered the region by now were it not for the great pressure the Empire was exuding.

Estaburg’s soldiers fought best on wooded terrain, which was fortunate, considering the vast forest between it and Belgaria, but the imperial troops could easily regain the advantage by bringing the battle to open plains. As a result of this back and forth, the war front had reached a stalemate many years ago and had remained this way ever since.

Marschedt was more than fortified enough to endure an attack, and the land surrounding it was made up of expansive fields of wheat; Belgaria would be at an advantage even if the battle was brought outside the city walls.

“What’s that, then?” Jerome asked. There was a lone piece on the map situated some distance away from all the others.

Coigniera hesitated for a moment. “Fort Häupert. It was built in an effort to expand our territory.”

“I see.” It was in a decent location if that was their intention. Some might have bemoaned the dangers of establishing a fortress a light stroll away from the forests where Estaburg reigned supreme, but Jerome had a particular soft spot for gutsy moves.

“There are six hundred soldiers stationed there. Their commander is from House Barguesonne, and—”

“Six hundred? An army that small doesn’t inspire much confidence.”

“You’re right, but there are strongholds other than Marschedt on the eastern front. Even if we count the men stationed there among our available forces, we would only have eighteen thousand in total. We’ve had to spread ourselves as thin as possible...” Coigniera said. Six hundred was apparently the most they could spare for Häupert.

“Call them back. It’s foolish to fixate on our offensive cards when we’ve been pushed on the defensive.”

“There is a Belgarian town right behind Fort Häupert. The soldiers intend to protect its residents.”

Jerome tutted. “Evacuate the residents then.”

“Unfortunately, not even Marschedt has the capacity to house them all. They would need to live in tents outside the walls...which would put them in harm’s way when the enemy comes.”

There was no point in evacuating the civilians from one battlefield to another, and putting them outside Marschedt would make them especially vulnerable. They would either be killed or taken as hostages. Their wealth would go straight to Estaburg’s war chest, while their food supplies would feed the mouths of enemy soldiers.

“What about the other strongholds?” Jerome asked.

“They are quite some distance from Häupert, so it would be a long trip—likely too much for the women, children, and elderly. It might be worth the risk if we receive confirmation that Häupert is going to fall...but it has held steady so far.”

“So it’s sturdy?”

“About as much as your average fortress. There used to be five thousand soldiers there.”

Belgaria’s losses during the war had put the fortress in a regrettable position. Rather than spreading the army even thinner than it already was, Coignière had made the decision to cut Häupert off entirely. It was an appropriate call to make, as far as Jerome was concerned. The only problem was that the fort was not the only thing that would fall.

Jerome clicked his tongue. “Why did they build a town there?”

“Err... The merchants set up shops for the soldiers which eventually became buildings. Their families moved in, had children, and then those children grew up to till the land. The fields spread, and, well...”

“So it’s not a new settlement.”

“Although we have had many engagements, the line had remained steady for quite some time. I’m actually from there, truth be told. The town is called Aphäut, since it was built near Häupert.”

Jerome was a little surprised; he would need to revise his opinion of the man standing before him. Coignèra was making the correct strategic decision, to be sure, but was presumably quite cold to have cast aside his own homeland.

“How many soldiers can we house at Häupert?” Jerome asked.

“Ten thousand at most, if we pushed its capacity to the absolute limit.”

“It’s not really a stronghold then.” It was around the same size at Fort Sierck, Jerome’s previous base of operations. It would manage fine in small skirmishes, but the unit stationed there stood no chance against a force three times its size.

Jerome understood that there was no point in complaining to the man who had only recently become a commander, but he considered it absurd that Häupert had not been expanded while Aphäut was being founded. And if such an expansion were not possible, they never should have permitted the construction of the town. Jerome had forbidden any shops from being set up near Fort Sierck. It was an inconvenience for the soldiers living there, but it preserved the strategic option of abandoning the fort in a time of crisis and safely retreating to Theonveil.

“It’s like building a house without a roof because it happened to be sunny that day...” Jerome noted.

“There is an ongoing effort to expand Marschedt. If all goes as planned, it should be possible to rehouse every single resident of Aphäut, but...” Coigniera hung his head. “The work is not due to be completed until the spring of next year.”

Were Estaburg passive enough to wait an entire year, the east would not have needed reinforcements from the Fourth Army.

Jerome sighed. “If those townsfolk refuse to abandon their precious town, so be it. But that’s a waste of six hundred soldiers. Call them back.”

“I cannot guarantee they will obey, even if I give the order.”

“What do you mean? Are those six hundred someone’s personal army?”

“Everyone in Häupert was born in Aphäut. They are all new recruits and old men who were not called to join the campaign. If they are attacked...I presume they are resolved to die.”

“So you’ve left them there because they won’t make any meaningful contributions to our war potential.”

Coigniera clenched his fists. “Under any other circumstances, I would gladly join the fight at Häupert... But I must take command to defend the Empire.”



After going over the situation, a new line of command was established. Both the Black Knight Brigade and the former Second Army would take orders from the Seventh Army from that point onward.

Once the meeting was over, the map was put away, and food was served. Massive plates were brought out, each loaded with smaller, exquisitely made morsels. The main dish was venison.

Jerome glanced at the man beside him, the new deputy head of the Black Knight Brigade. Holger was somewhat decent in combat and on horseback, but he excelled most in his ability to command others.

“What do you think?” Jerome asked.

“Tender and delicious, and the citrus sauce is unrivaled. I expect no less from Belgian chefs.”

“I wasn’t talking about the meat.”

“That was a joke,” Holger chuckled. He was a strange one indeed; not even seasoned veterans tried to banter with Jerome. He lowered his voice into a whisper. “Marschedt won’t fall regardless of how the Black Knight Brigade moves, but the Seventh Army is currently a mishmash of broken men. The brigadier general won’t want to relinquish a highly trained cavalry regiment.”

Jerome stabbed his knife into the great cut of venison at the center of the table. The map had already been put away, but he had managed to stick the blade precisely where Marschedt had previously been depicted. “How will they come at us?” he asked.

“Their first move won’t be to attack this stronghold. I imagine they’ll target another key point.”

“Most likely. But what if they do come for Marschedt?”

Holger reached out his fork and slid its prongs across the wood grain of the table, east of the makeshift marker. “They’ll first try to force their way through. Once they notice that doesn’t work, they’ll attack in the night. If that fails, they’ll plunder the nearby towns... At least, I assume they will.”

Jerome’s knife tore through the venison steak. A cavalry attack from behind would no doubt prove effective when that happened. “How would you deal with it?” he asked.

“Sitting around and waiting for them sounds like a bore. Isn’t it more your style to send out the cavalry as soon as you see them? To charge ahead and seize their commander’s life?”

“That’s how the Black Knight Brigade does things. I’m glad someone gets it.”

“That said, if we’re up against cannons, I’d advise we stay inside the city walls.”

“Good. I’ll leave that to you.”

“I take it you’re heading out then. Are we halving the brigade?”

“I’m more than enough on my own.”

Holger looked perplexed. “You’re not making me your stand-in, are you?”

“Discontent? I see where you’re coming from, since you’re not getting a pay raise.”

“I’d only expect a reward for a job well done, but my word... Life really has its twists and turns.”

And so, the Black Knight Brigade was entrusted to Holger. It was perhaps less impressive than it sounded; the brigade was going to remain within the safe city walls for the foreseeable future, anyway.

Jerome rose from his chair. “Coignièra!”

“Y-Yes?!” the brigadier general stammered. “What seems to be the problem?! Do you need me to pass the salt?!”

“This ain’t about the meat! Holger Orjes here is taking over from me. You can count on him to manage the cavalry.”

“Huh?”

“You can claim victory on the open plains even without me. And as we discussed...you’re taking command of the army as a whole.”

“O-Of course.”

“I’ve already ordered my men to cut down anyone who lags behind.”

Benjamin barely contained a shriek. The riders of the Black Knight Brigade were loyal to the point of being fanatical; they would not hesitate to slay a noble on Jerome’s command.

Holger saluted. “I am Third-Grade Combat Officer Holger Orjes. I may be a newcomer, but I am honored to work with you, Sir Coigniera.”

“U-Understood...” Coigniera replied. “But where are you going, Sir Jerome? Are you returning to Fort Volks?”

There was a massive thud as Jerome stabbed his knife into the table once again, this time sticking the blade where Fort Häupert had been on the map. “Here. This is where the enemy will attack first.”



The next day—

Jerome spurred his trusty steed toward Fort Häupert. He had departed that morning and managed to reach his destination by evening.

“So this is Aphäut...”

As absurd as it was, the town really was there, attached to the fort. It had the capacity to house around twenty thousand people, at least judging by the number of buildings, but half of the residents had evacuated when the number of soldiers stationed at the fort was drastically reduced. There were now just short of ten thousand, apparently—many of whom were children and old-timers who would struggle on the long journey.

Just beyond the main street lined with shops, Jerome saw a relatively low stone wall with a lookout tower. The sight alone brought him

back to his time at Fort Sierck. He could feel the same pang in his chest as when he had first seen the puny fort he was assigned to.

Jerome gritted his teeth as he handed a letter to the gatekeeper and declared his credentials. A ruckus followed, and soon enough, the commander of the fort came out to meet him. He had heard that the unit stationed there was composed mainly of new recruits and old soldiers, but nothing had prepared him for what he was now seeing.

The commander was a woman.

“Urgh...” Jerome pinched the bridge of his nose. A tiny fort, a female commander... His head hurt as he recalled the duel that had stained his career. She had brown hair that rested neatly at her shoulders, and she looked to be around twenty.

The woman offered a model salute. “I am Second-Grade Combat Officer Marion Alphons de Bargesonne. I command the Seventh Army’s detachment stationed at Fort Häupert.”

“I’ve been told you’re related to the lieutenant general.”

She paused for a moment before answering. “My grandfather was a wonderful commander.”

Jerome harrumphed. *So she’s his granddaughter, eh?*

“Is it customary to skip introductions in the Fourth Army?” Marion asked. Her tone was polite, but her sharp eyes somewhat resembled the impertinent princess. It was irritating.

“Major General Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. Think before you answer this—do you seriously intend to survive?”

“Huh? W-Well...I intend to give it my all! That’s what we’ve all decided!”

We? Is that really what a commander should say?! Jerome cursed to himself. In any case, Coigniera was right—the soldiers here had no intention of abandoning the last fort protecting their homeland.

“Tsk... Fine. Show me around the fort.”

“On whose authority—?! Ah, no, this must be about the Fourth Army coming as reinforcements. A brief tour is the least I can do for you.”

Jerome may have held a higher rank, but he was not of the same army; there was no obligation for Marion to listen to his orders. Even so, she seemed to come to terms with it. She was strong-willed but at least somewhat rational.

She's gonna be a real pain, isn't she?



After inspecting the gate and outer wall, Jerome checked the lookout towers, the stables, the food storage, and the armory. The facilities were in rather standard condition for a fortress. He then gazed over the soldiers gathered on the training grounds. They were noisy and restless, the sorts who would not be chosen for an expedition even if the Empire were in peril. He had no expectations when it came to their abilities; he could tell how poorly trained they were just from the looks on their faces.

“Weak, the lot of them,” Jerome sighed. “Not even worth consideration.”

Marion glared at him. “Isn’t that a bit uncalled for? Mouthing off about someone else’s unit?!”

“There’s a town behind this fort...yet for some ridiculous reason, no plans have been made for an evacuation. If an enemy attacks, the townsfolk are gonna have no choice but to pile into your fortress. And if your detachment loses, then all those innocent civilians are gonna die with it.”

“W-We are well aware of that! That’s why we remain here!”

“Of course, I won’t let that happen in the first place.”

“Huh?!”

“I hate losing. I won’t let the likes of Estaburg take even a single puny fortress. Under my watch, Fort Häupert will never fall.”

At this declaration, the faces of all those gathered immediately lit up.

“A-Are there going to be more reinforcements coming here?!”

Marion asked.

“Fool. The Empire doesn’t have the troops to spare. Don’t you know what happened during the war?”

“I...I read the report. Then how?”

“Hmph... Utter trash. You’re a soldier, right? You want to protect your home, don’t you? Then fight and win! No matter how noble your ideals might be, they’re all meaningless if you can’t seize victory.”

“You’re asking for the impossible! How can we possibly win without reinfor—” Marion suddenly cut herself short. “Ah. No. We intend to win, of course. But while Estaburg is far smaller than Belgaria, it is a powerful nation with a well-funded military. Our enemy has close to thirty thousand soldiers—not that I expect an outsider to know that!”

“That just means you have to get stronger.”

“Everyone here is either too old or a fresh recruit!”

Jerome offered no verbal response; instead, he held out a sheet of paper marked with the signature of the brigadier general.

“Hand over the...r-right to command...?” Marion said, her head spinning as she read the decree. “That’s absurd! To someone who just showed up?! I refuse! I’ll issue a formal complaint to Mr. Coignière! Such an order would never have gone through if my grandfather was—”

There came a sudden *crack* like the shattering of stone as Marion dropped to the ground, her face bruised. “Good grief...” Jerome grumbled. “Anyone else want to complain about their orders? I’m your commander now. If you still can’t understand that, come forward. I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget.”

The uproar grew even louder. Even in patriarchal Belgaria, any man who raised a hand against a woman was treated like a barbarian. It was brutality unbecoming a noble. And many on the eastern front were already familiar with the legend of the Black Knight, so they knew he was abnormally strong. A shudder ran through the troops. Was this man truly prepared to kill them if they disobeyed his orders?

Jerome gave a satisfied nod. “All right. Then let’s get some grub!”

Only then did the men remember it was about time for dinner.



“What’s this supposed to be?” Jerome asked, prodding through the contents of his bowl with a spoon. The soup he had been served was mostly hot water—hot water with a reasonable amount of meat mixed into it, but hot water nonetheless. The soldiers were making do with minced vegetables.

“Stocks are low. What else can we do?” Marion retorted, sounding ever irritated. She had a dark-blue mark under her eye, but she had proven to be surprisingly sturdy—it was clear to see why she was recognized as a commander. She had regained consciousness rather quickly and was now seated beside Jerome, having appointed herself deputy after begrudgingly accepting the order to surrender her position.

Even after I knocked her lights out... Is she made of steel or just plain thick? Suppose it doesn't matter either way.

“You can’t raise strong troops on this,” Jerome said. “Bring out the meat.”

“We don’t have any.”

“It’s the commander’s duty to prepare some.”

“We can’t afford any.”

“Then go out and start hunting.”

“Please don’t be so unreasonable,” Marion retorted, fixing the Black Knight with a firm glare. “Estaburg is lying in ambush in the forest, and its Evergreen Infantry is incredibly strong. They’re the reason the people of Aphäut can’t even go out and gather their own food. Of course, they won’t attack if we bring enough men, but then the animals all run away.”

Marion was wearing an expression that seemed to say, “See? There’s nothing you can do!” Her attitude irritated Jerome, but he needed to put emotions aside and focus only on the necessary information. After racking their brains on what to do about food, they eventually decided on salty soup.

Coignière’s unit was being served normal meals. Were supplies not being sent to Fort Häupert because the men stationed there were considered useless soldiers?

“If you can’t use the forest, take supplies from the town.”

“I’m trying to tell you, the town doesn’t have any meat either.”

“They have livestock to survive the winter, don’t they?”

“What?! You want us to use up their winter supplies?! I misjudged you! I was almost a little thankful when you arrived. I thought you’d come to protect Aphäut. But no! You’re a savage!”

“If your fortress falls, the town’s food stocks become provisions for the Estaburg Army. The townsfolk are better off surrendering it than being killed for it.”

“Are you stupid? How are they supposed to survive the winter without winter supplies?! They’ll die regardless of how the war turns out!”

What’s the use in worrying about winter when the enemy could be on our doorstep tonight?

Jerome sighed. Maybe this resistance was to be expected; anyone with a good sense of crisis would have abandoned ship by now. The ones left were those who believed things would work themselves out or who refused to think about the situation...or who had given up entirely. He knew that he could give the order and the soldiers would obey, but they had all been born and raised in Aphäut; having them commandeer their own people’s livestock would create a notable drop in morale.

“Hmph. Fine. I’ll procure the food they need for the winter,” Jerome conceded. “But for now, we need what they’ve got in town.”

“What are you going to do?” Marion asked. “We don’t have the money to buy supplies from other territories.”

That goddamn cheapskate of a duke...

Jerome let out another sigh. Despite being a duke, Lieutenant General Bargesonne had levied only the minimum necessary taxes from the people and saved no surplus capital during his time supporting the eastern front. There was a rumor that he would even hammer out the dents in his worn-down armor to avoid having to replace it.

Food reserves processed for storage were far more expensive than supplies procured on-site. Two months of hunting in the forest was usually sufficient to gather enough meat to survive the winter, but

two months of heavy labor would not bring in enough money to buy the same amount of provisions. Transportation costs were high, even in Belgaria, where the roads were well maintained.

Jerome ultimately decided to offload the duty on someone else. "It's all right. Leave it to me," he said. "The Empire's Fourth Army has a tactician known as 'the Wizard.' He can secure us enough food for a small town without breaking a sweat."

The man himself would have certainly objected had he been there to hear it. The question was whether Marion was willing to believe it.

The young woman leaned in close. "You're going to turn to Sir Regis d'Aurick?!" she asked.

Sir?

It seemed that word of the tactician's exploits had reached as far as the eastern border. Jerome nodded. "I'll work him to the bone. He's practically my subordinate."

"He's not going to come here, is he?!"

Hah! That piece of trash should be studying for his exams about now! Jerome thought. Despite his opinion of the tactician, however, he knew that raising his reputation could prove quite useful in the future. "He's in the capital. His competence makes him pretty busy."

"Ah... Of course. A national hero would never come to a fort in the middle of nowhere..." Marion slumped over and sighed. "Be it on land or sea, he thoroughly defeated the High Britannian Army that even my mighty grandfather couldn't take down. I'm sure that God-gifted tactician could find a solution, even here."

Is this "mighty grandfather" she's talking about the same guy who only ever ordered his men to charge? And is this "God-gifted tactician" meant to be Regis? It was so far from the truth that Jerome started to feel dizzy.

“He’s just a book rat.”

“He reads, does he?” Marion asked. “I see. He must have pored over history’s greatest strategy books. I need to learn from his example.”

“It’s all useless fantasy and science fiction.”

“You’re lying...” Marion looked dissatisfied with this answer.

Jerome shrugged. “Regis isn’t coming east, but he *is* conveniently in the capital right now. I’ll have him send over some food. Now, go and commandeer those supplies.”

“Are you sure he can help us?”

“I’ll smash his head in if he refuses!”

“Don’t do that! Hah... Well, if you’re sure everything will be okay... I suppose the Fourth Army *is* an elite force. I’m sure they’re in a better situation than the Seventh Army.”

“Elite...?”

“They have an imperial princess at the helm with a genius young tactician by her side. And the Black Knight too, of course! Ah, but I never thought you would be such a brute... Anyway, if the First Army is the shield that protects the capital, the Fourth was forged as the sword to bury our enemies! I heard it was a mighty force put together from the Empire’s elites.”

“Idiot.”

“Th-That was sudden! You’re pretty rude!”

Jerome was a *hero*—a man whose accomplishments were so great that he had been driven from the capital out of envy. Meanwhile, the fourth princess had been banished simply for losing a power struggle, while Regis had been relocated after shouldering the responsibility for an unfortunate lost battle. Marion’s continued

misconceptions had turned Jerome's dizziness into full-blown nausea.

Jerome waved away Marion as though he were shooing away a dog. "Just go already. Have the meat ready by dinnertime tomorrow."

"Ah, for crying out loud... Just so you know, I won't be expropriating anything. I intend to *borrow* from the townsfolk. I'll put together proper contracts and everything. And my name won't be the only one at the bottom—you're going to sign them too!"

"Whatever you want."

Marion was no longer the active commander, yet she insisted on including her own name on the contracts. *She's diligent, I'll give her that*, Jerome thought.

After downing her soup in a single gulp, Marion shot to her feet. "I'll have the papers ready by tomorrow morning!" she declared.

"You're writing them yourself...?" Jerome asked in disbelief. "Where are your admin officers?"

"We only have twenty for our entire detachment, so I'm having to pitch in. Rumor has it the First Army has over a thousand. I'm sure you have plenty in the Fourth Army. I'm envious, to say the least."

"I sacked them all. Regis is the only admin officer we have."

"Huh...?"

"No, wait. I think he's got one of Auguste's girls working for him now. He gets some help from the maids too, but that's about it." He had petitioned the Ministry of Military Affairs for more staff, but the very idea had been shelved the moment war broke out with High Britannia.

"Th-There's no way you could get anything done like that... Ah, you're lying again! You're writing me off as some stupid country

bumpkin, but I won't be fooled!" Marion protested with puffed-out cheeks.

Jerome shoved a spoonful of the salty soup into his mouth. It was good that they had supplies now, but...he would need to inform Regis of the situation. This meant writing a letter, and while he was at least more competent than the princess in that regard, he hated doing paperwork. He clicked his tongue, barely able to muster the motivation to get out of his seat.



The next morning—

The soldiers were a little more restless than usual. Along with their usual breakfasts, they had each been served a helping of ham.

"Will this make them stronger?" Marion asked, wearing an expression that revealed just how proud she was of her accomplishment.

Jerome shrugged. "It's a start."

After breakfast, the soldiers were ordered to gather at the training grounds. Jerome stood before them, sternly eyeing his new troops.

"You're all weak!" he declared.

The soldiers winced. Under any other circumstances, at least some of the men would have voiced their outrage at such a harsh remark...but no one dared snap back at the Black Knight.

"Far too weak," Jerome continued. "But if you lose, the fort falls, and the townsfolk are as good as dead."

Some of the soldiers now looked on the verge of tears.

"That's not an option. You have to win! And that's why I'm going to train you!"

As the troops began to murmur among themselves and exchange looks, a young man standing near the front of the crowd raised his hand. “C-Can we really get stronger?” he asked.

“You can!” Jerome boomed. “Muscle and technique can’t be built up in a day, but spirit is something else! Spirit can change in an instant!”

The soldiers’ faces immediately lit up. Marion’s eyes were positively sparkling.

“What’s with those sappy faces?!” Jerome yelled. “The instant your spirit changes is the instant you start seeing hell!”

“H-Hell...?!”

A smile played on Jerome’s lips as the hopeful air vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. “You’ll be seeing hell, all right!” he roared. “If you can change, change! Change to beat the enemy! No, by then, the enemy might be the least of your worries!”

“P-Please wait a second!” Marion interjected in a panic. “What are you trying to do?! We’ve nothing but new recruits and elderly here! Push them too hard and they’ll be worn out before battle!”

“Not my problem! Starting today, they’re gonna be training so hard they’ll wish they were dead. In fact, some actually will die. The unfocused, the unskilled, and the unlucky will perish!”

“I can’t let you do that!”

Paying no mind to Marion’s protests, Jerome addressed the gathered soldiers. “If any of you think you won’t be able to handle it, come forward now! I’ll exempt you from training!”

Much to Marion’s surprise, the soldiers actually looked rather hopeful. It came as a considerable relief.

How irritating...

“Spoiled brats, the lot of you. You’re weak. That’s why you foolishly believe nothing bad will ever happen to you. The enemy could invade any day now and slaughter your families, yet not a single one of you grows desperate! That’s why you’re failures! It’s not because you’re fresh recruits or because you’re too old. You’re weak because you’re gutless cowards! That’s why you’ll die! Every last one of you!”

“What...?!” Marion and all the soldiers turned pale. It was clear now that Jerome had no intention of showing any mercy, no matter how fearful they were.

“I’m not your drill instructor! This isn’t an academy! We’re at a fort, the front line, a battlefield! The weak will be used as the weak ought to be used! Training starts today! Just come to me if you can’t keep up! I’ll send you out into the forest to hunt!”

The soldier who had previously raised his hand stepped forward. “This is tyranny!” he cried. “What you’re proposing is certain death! The Evergreen Infantry’s in the forest! There’s no way such an insane order would ever be permitted!”

“Oh? Are you gonna have me tried at the Ministry? Go ahead. Let’s hope this fort is still here by next fall, when your complaint finally makes it through that bureaucratic hellhole and an official comes to inspect the situation.”

“Erk...”

“Besides, weren’t you all prepared to die protecting this fort?”

“O-Of course, but...that was with all of us fighting together...”

“Bloody fool! When you fight, you fight alone! Your allies are baggage! They’ll drag you down!”

“H-Huh?!” the youth stammered.

Marion held her head. “Y-You only think that because you’re strong...Sir Jerome. The weak need to work together...”

“Cooperation between the weak makes me laugh! How can you expect to coordinate if you don’t even know how to hold your own? Trash piled together just makes a pile of trash!”

“There’s power in numbers!” the young man refuted. “That’s what I was taught. We can achieve the stuff of miracles if we just combine our strength. There’s six hundred of us here; together, we could even defeat the Black Knight!” He placed a hand on his sword, but Jerome merely scoffed.

“Okay. So?”

“Take it all back! How can you call this training when you’re sending us to our deaths?! I won’t let you send anyone into the forest!”

Jerome chuckled. “You really think you can beat me with six hundred men? Go on, then. Draw your sword. I’ll teach you just how useless you really are!”

“U-Urgh...”

Jerome slowly walked forward, closing in on the young soldier.

“Training starts now. Your objective is simple: survive.”

“Eh?”

“Survive against me. C’mon. It’s just training. I’ll hold back.”

“What are you—?!”



The young soldier was thrown into the air as Jerome's fist planted into his stomach. Almost simultaneously, the Black Knight snatched the sword from the man's waist and inspected it. It was a mass-produced model, but it was properly maintained.

"Hmph... At least you know how to take care of a weapon. Oh, by the way—I take training very seriously. Anyone who leaves this yard will be labeled a deserter and cut down. Don't run if you don't want to die."

"N-Now you've done it!" another soldier yelled. He charged at Jerome, who twisted his torso just enough to evade a thrust from the man's blade before smacking the flat of his borrowed sword into his back. The Black Knight then slashed at one of the men watching in a daze, drawing blood from his forehead.

"E-Eh?!"

"Some nerve you have there, daydreaming in a fight against me! That's a surefire way to die!"

Several of the soldiers standing nearby fled in tears. "Waaah!" one wailed. "This... This is crazy! It's messed up! No more!"

"No! Don't run!" Marion screamed. "He really will kill you!"

A few levelheaded men reacted to her order, grabbing the deserters before they could escape the yard. "D-Don't run! Marion's right!" they exclaimed. "The Black Knight won't kill us for attacking him! If that was his intention, there'd be dead bodies all around us!"

"B-B-But...!"

"Over there! See? He's n-not dead yet! At least, I don't think he is!"

The young man who had sustained the first blow hobbled to his feet and—"Urghhhh... Blergh!"—proceeded to vomit all over the ground.

"Good grief..." Jerome sighed. "All that ham, wasted."

“H-He’s a demon...”

Jerome cackled. “Don’t be ridiculous... I’m a real stand-up guy. That’s why I stand up for myself when the priest badmouths us at Sunday mass.”

The soldiers were finally all starting to grasp their current situation: the man before them had a terrible personality. He was skilled enough to be called a hero, but he knew nothing about the value of a human life.

“Remember your training, everyone!” Marion cried out. “Surround him and take him down!”

“Good, good. Finally getting into it, are we?” Jerome remarked.

“Now, come at me all at once. Better be quick about it. Once I start getting tired, I might accidentally forget to hold back.”

The screams of six hundred echoed through Fort Häupert.



That night—

Jerome was lying in bed. His candle was extinguished, so the room was illuminated solely by the dim light seeping in through the nearby window.

All of a sudden, there was a quiet knock at the door. Jerome offered no response, but the door swung open nonetheless, and in stepped a small shadow emboldened only by the glow of the moon.

“Attacking me in my sleep? You move pretty nimbly, I’ll give you that, but you didn’t have to knock.”

The figure pricked up her ears at Jerome’s words and let out a deep breath. “If you’re awake, then you should have said something sooner,” came Marion’s voice.

“I was asleep.”

“You’re lying. A gentle knock wouldn’t be enough to wake you.”

“We’re on the battlefield.”

“We’re not— No, forget about that. I wanted to talk about today’s training.”

“Do you think I held back too much?”

“No, quite the opposite! You took it way too far. The sick bay’s full, everyone’s wounded all over... It’s like we went to war. S-Some of them are crying, you know!”

“They’re not the only ones. After seeing how pathetic they are, I want to cry too.”

“Now’s not the time for jokes!”

“Hah... You’re the real joke here. You can’t wage a war with such weak soldiers. If the enemy attacks, anyone even close to the rear will desert the moment the front line starts taking losses. You saw how they were against me, and I’m just one man.”

“Th-That’s... That’s because you attacked without warning...”

“Do you think you’d get warning in a real battle? You become the new front line the moment the blokes in front of you croak.”

“Most of the soldiers here are conscripted farmers. They’re used to working the fields or doing construction work.”

“I could tell at a glance. The Seventh Army’s expedition force was decently trained; only the dregs were left behind.”

“I can’t deny that. That’s why no one complained when a woman like me was appointed commander. The soldiers here aren’t elites like those in the Fourth Army.”

“So, what? Are you gonna surrender the moment Estaburg attacks?”

“That’s...”

“Everyone dies sooner or later. If you’re soldiers, at least die fighting the enemy. It’s disgraceful to succumb to an arrow in the back.”

“I... I know that. But what you did out there... That was terrible...”

“There’s something else you need to understand: no normal training will turn those men into proper soldiers.”

“That’s not true!” Marion exclaimed, now standing right at Jerome’s bedside. Surprisingly enough, she was not wearing her uniform. Instead, she was dressed in a nightgown that exposed her shoulders—a subtle reminder that she was indeed a noblewoman.

Jerome looked at her face closely in the pale moonlight. “Has that mark faded already...?” he murmured.

“I’ve hidden it with makeup.”

“Hah. Some words of advice—don’t come to a man’s room at night wearing makeup. It won’t end well for you. Though I’ll keep you company if you insist.”

“O-Of course...” Marion’s voice quavered. “The Black Knight must be used to these things...”

“Of course. First, it’s good etiquette to remove your dress before you enter a man’s bed,” Jerome instructed her in a voice that seemed to melt into the night air.

Marion placed a hand on her nightgown’s shoulder strap and froze. Removing such a measly piece of clothing should have been simple, but this motion was at complete odds with her sense of shame.

Jerome chortled. “And if you want to get any use out of your knife, you’d better take care to hide your intentions.”

“You noticed?!” Marion yelled, her face bright red. She thrust out the blade she had attempted to keep hidden...

At least she’s determined.

...but Jerome effortlessly grabbed her by the wrist. Her arm was so slender that he thought it might snap just from a little extra force. She was an ordinary person—not like Altina.

“Yeah, this really shouldn’t come as a surprise...” Jerome muttered to himself. “The princess is an exception.”

“I-I’ll kill you!”

“Didn’t you want to protect the fort? How do you achieve that by killing me?”

“If you keep up that terrible training of yours, everyone will die before the enemy even comes near us! I’m protecting my men!”

Jerome grabbed Marion and yanked her close. “Imbecile! Your overprotectiveness is what’s made them go rotten!”

“Overprotectiveness?!”

“Just look at you! I don’t think they’re nearly as hopeless as you do! Nor have I abandoned them!”

“Abandoned...? I haven’t—”

“Your true nature comes not in words, but in actions. I’m trying to help them improve. You’re trying to stop me. Now, which one of us actually thinks the soldiers can grow stronger? Which one of us thinks they can win the war? You think my training is terrible? The soldiers are still alive, aren’t they? And tomorrow, they’ll be finer men than they were today!”

“I-I just...wanted to...”

Marion fell silent. Her words had failed her. All she could do was tremble before the intensity of the Black Knight.



The bugles sounded their wake-up call before dawn, marking the start of the Häupert soldiers’ second day of training.

“Hraaah!”

“Gryaaah!”

Jerome threw a punch, sending one man flying through the air. Far from running away, however, the other soldiers were already closing in with their swords at the ready. It seemed they had already grown accustomed to their friends being thrown around; no longer did they falter when a whole group of men were knocked from their feet.

“It’s over, Black Knight!”

“Hmph. Think again.”

Jerome drew his weapon. He dodged and parried the swords coming at him before kicking the nearest soldier square in the stomach.

“Hngh!”

Their training continued up to breakfast, then up to lunch, and then finally up to the evening bell. For an entire month, the soldiers kept up this merciless routine.



The fortified city of Marschedt—

It was early morning when Coigniera started swinging his sword in the courtyard. Although his days were predominantly taken up by meetings and paperwork, his physique was his last bastion on the battlefield. He could not neglect his training.

“Hup! Hup!”

“Good morning. You’re getting pretty into it.”

The voice came from Holger, proxy head of the Black Knight Brigade.

Coigniera smiled, wiping his body down with a cloth one of the maids had given him. “You’ve caught me at a terrible time,” he said. “This must look like mere child’s play to you.”

The Black Knight Brigade was seen as the strongest order of knights in the Empire. This title had previously been reserved for the First Army, but rumors had spread quickly following their defeat during the national day celebrations.

“Not at all,” Holger replied with a shake of his head. “You looked just fine. I’m sorry to interrupt your training, but a letter came in.”

“A letter?”

“From our tactician.”

“Oh, from Sir Regis!” Coignière exclaimed. He raced over to see that Holger was actually holding two letters.

“One is addressed to Sir Jerome. I checked it just in case—it’s about supplying food to Aphäut, and a few other things.”

“You opened a private message?!”

“Of course. If they were orders for the Black Knight Brigade, as the proxy head, I am responsible for enacting them.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I haven’t read the letter addressed to you, sir. No need to worry.” Holger handed over an envelope with the wax seal still intact.

“Ah, no... I wasn’t suspecting that you had.”

“Aha. I understand that you meant nothing by it. I am a foreign tramp, though; it is perfectly normal for you to be wary of me. That is how it should be.”

“Is it really?”

“They say that trusting others is a virtue. I personally think that a commander is better off being cautious.”

“Certainly. I wouldn’t be a reliable commander if I allowed myself to be deceived so easily.”

“Right... Incidentally, did you send a letter to the tactician?”

“I stuck it along with the one that Sir Jerome sent. Pathetic as it may sound, I wrote about the situation on the eastern front and asked for his thoughts on the matter,” Coigniera said. He broke the seal on the envelope handed to him and opened the paper within. It was Regis’s handwriting, without a doubt.

“Hmm... So what did he say?” Holger asked, looking rather intrigued. “Actually, no. If you’d rather not tell me, I completely understand.”

“Ha ha... I do trust you, Sir Holger. Despite what you just told me.”

Holger was promptly shown the letter, much to his own surprise. He lowered his eyes to the page and then murmured. “Mm... This is...”

“Indeed. It’s almost like a prophecy of what’s to come.”

“Are you going to act on his words?”

“Personally, I intend to devote myself to protecting our strongholds, but...”

“The Black Knight Brigade is ready to go.”

“As is the Seventh Army, of course.”

After exchanging looks, Holger and Coigniera gave one another a nod of understanding.



“Meat! Pass me some meat!”

It was time for lunch in Fort Häupert, and the soldiers were seething. Blood dripped from the outstretched arm of one young soldier. Marion raced over with a bandage as soon as she noticed.

“Hey! You’re wounded, aren’t you?!”

“Ah, Marion... Wounded? The Black Knight grazed me with his sword, is all. Didn’t reach the bone, so I’m perfectly fine.”

“G-Grazed you...with his sword...?”

“Yeah. A few of us weren’t so lucky—the blade went right through ’em, bone and all. Couldn’t look ’em in the eye if I started complaining about this little thing.”

“But your wounds will fester if you leave them.”

“If they do go rotten, I’ll just burn ’em. That’s what everyone’s doing these days. Nice and quick.”

“B-Burn them?!”

“Oh, but you get pretty hungry when you’re bleeding. Found that out recently. Ah, come to think of it, Marion...”

“Y-Yes...?”

“Thanks a bunch! I heard you were the one who got us the meat. We’re all grateful!”

“Yes, but... I was only able to secure it from the townspeople because Regis promised them food to last the winter...”

“That Regis guy is pretty great, sure, but you’re the one who got results! Tomorrow’s the day I’ll land a good punch on the Black Knight! Just you watch!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” the surrounding soldiers cried. “Beat him to a pulp!”

Marion sighed. “Look out for yourselves,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am!”

All of a sudden, a messenger rushed in and kneeled before Marion. She thought it odd, considering that she was no longer the active commander, but it was clear from the man’s haste that it was urgent.

“What happened...?” Marion asked.

“A group emerged from the forest. It might be an enemy attack!”

“An enemy attack?!”

“What shall we do?!”

“Do we know for sure that they’re an enemy? And do we have an idea of their numbers?”

Before the messenger could answer, he was hoisted up by the lapels by a furious Jerome. “Your first course of action should be to report to me, your commander,” the Black Knight growled.

“M-My apologies!” came a pained reply.

“Sound the bell at once!” Jerome yelled.

“Huh?!” Marion was panicked. “But we need to confirm it really is an attack—”

“Fool. Battles are won by speed! We take action, and if we find out this is a false report, we’ll just wring the lookout’s neck!” He lobbed the messenger toward the door.

“Gwah?!”

“Run!” Jerome yelled. “Run, because your life depends on it! Ring that bell, and then come back with a *detailed rundown* of the enemy’s movements!”

“Understood, sir!” the messenger stammered. He then fled the room in such haste that he nearly tripped over himself on the way out.

Marion’s face clouded with concern. “Won’t you have put everyone on edge for no reason if this *is* just a false report?”

“Consider it good training for them either way. Besides...looks like they really are here. The real deal.”

“Eh?”

Jerome's lips curled into a fierce smile. "Kuh kuh kuh... Talk about having a presence. They've got a pretty strong one with 'em. And they're purposely coming at us with bloodlust just to rile me up."

"Y-You're lying!" Marion protested. "How... How can you even sense something like bloodlust?!"

"Does that go against your common sense? What a restricted worldview."

"What?!"

"If you're going to watch, stay where the arrows won't reach you."

"I can fight perfectly well, thank you!"

Jerome placed a hand on Marion's shoulder. "Don't push yourself. You're shaking."

"Ah..."

"Cowards get in the way."

After delivering those harsh words, Jerome headed for his trusty steed. The alarm bell rang a beat later, exactly as he had commanded.

"Enemy raid! Enemy raid! Estaburg are coming!"



As was agreed upon, the townsfolk were let into the fortress from the town-side gate. They were crammed onto the training ground for the time being—a dirt floor with no roof or anywhere to lie down. It was not an environment they could endure several days in, but the townsfolk knew it was better than waiting to be killed. Rather than complain, they sent grateful and encouraging words to the soldiers.

"Marion, we've finished evacuating the townsfolk!" one soldier cried. "We're closing the western gate!"

“Yes, please hurry. Also, inform Mr. Coignière.”

“I’ll raise a smoke signal!”

“On the double.”

Marion looked to the sky. The sun had just barely started its westward descent. They had perhaps another six hours before all visibility was compromised. *Will the fort be able to hold out that long?* she wondered. *Will our allies come to our assistance?*

The smoke signal streamed high into the air. Marion’s eyes shifted to the eastern wall, where the Black Knight was taking command.



Jerome scaled the eastern wall and gazed at his foe. The enemy army was slowly but surely marching closer, numbering roughly twenty thousand. They had not yet broken into a charge; although the forest was close enough to see, it was still fifty arpents (3,573 meters) away—a distance much too great to be cleared in one burst. There were perhaps fifteen minutes remaining before they would be within range of the fortress’s arrows.

The soldiers’ faces warped in fear, but Jerome merely chuckled as he voiced the terrifying reality of their situation. “Gah hah hah... That’s a lot of men they’ve got there.”

“Y-You’re not scared, sir?” one man asked.

“Of what?”

“We have six hundred, the enemy has twenty thousand. They outnumber us, um...how many times over?”

“Thirty times,” another soldier chimed in. “And that green armor means they’re the Evergreen Infantry. Estaburg’s archers are incredibly strong.”

Jerome glared at the soldiers. “So we have to take on thirty men each. You really think we can’t manage that? Looks like I held back too much during our training.”

“Erk. No, that’s not—”

“Laugh, then! Live a little! Those pieces of trash came here to lose!”

“Yes, sir!”

Fear had initially seeped into the men stationed at Fort Häupert, but Jerome’s merriment was contagious. Once a few started laughing in the face of the oncoming twenty thousand, the others soon followed. They were crooked, desperate smiles as they attempted to push back their cowardice, but it was better than them trembling to no end.

To think they’d throw their core unit at us all of a sudden... Jerome mused. They must be trying for a massive victory in the first battle to build morale and momentum.

Estaburg’s soldiers were clad in green, and they carried mid-weight bows despite the fact they were headed into a siege. Was this, perhaps, because those were the weapons they were most accustomed to? The enemy commander was evidently no fool; he understood that there was no better weapon than the one a soldier knew best.

Longbows would get in the way when racing through the trees, so Estaburg’s troops were wise to have armed themselves with something shorter, and they knew that the forest was the perfect territory for an ambush; it was near impossible to block the shots of an enemy that remained unseen. The roots and undergrowth also made for such terrible footing that it was hard for melee-focused soldiers to attack even when their foe was in sight.

However, the Evergreen Infantry had marched out onto the plains. Six hundred soldiers stood very little chance against an army of

twenty thousand, but this was the best opportunity they were going to get, and they needed to win to knock the wind out of the sails of this invasion.

As Jerome thought over their predicament, a messenger ran over. “Commander! A letter from the capital!” he announced.

“What?”

“From Tactician Regis d’Aurick!”

It just had to come now, of all times!

“Tsk...” Jerome glared at the innocent messenger, who raised a timid shriek in response. “The letter can wait. We’re in the middle of a battle!”

“Eh?! But it’s from—”

“What use is a letter from the capital going to be when the battle’s already begun?! Just leave it somewhere!”

“Y-Yes, sir...” The messenger gave a nod and then meekly retreated.

Jerome gritted his teeth. He knew there was a chance that the tactician had foreseen this very situation and written something about it, but he was the Black Knight—the man revered as a hero. He hadn’t fallen far enough to rely on the advice of someone so many lieue away.

I’ll win even without Regis’s schemes!

“Commander!” one of the soldiers shouted. “They’re within range!”

“Fire!”

The ballistae mounted on the walls launched a volley of stones, each the size of a human head. The troops had tested their range beforehand, so they knew with all certainty that the shots would reach their targets.

Estaburg's archers may have been skilled, but their forest bows would not be able to deliver their arrows far enough for them to return fire right away. The battle was going to be one-sided, at least for a short while.

But the ballistae at this fort aren't enough, Jerome thought. We won't even take out a thousand of the enemy's troops before they're in range.

Soon enough, Estaburg began to return fire. The forces at Häupert had anticipated that their enemy would come with skilled archers, so they were well prepared. Groups of soldiers held up massive shields as the arrows came down on them like rain.

“Wah!” One of the soldiers cried out, only to be smacked by another able man.

“You're a bloody fool, yelping like that! It's shameful!”

“R-Right!”

Although their counterstrategy was not perfect—several of the shield-holders came out injured—they had successfully staved off the enemy's first attack. Now, Estaburg troops approached the stone walls with long ladders. It was a classic siege tactic—the archers would occupy the fortress's defenses, allowing their soldiers to clamber to the top of the walls.

“Burn them down!” Jerome barked.

Obedying their orders, the Belgian soldiers cracked open barrels and started pouring dark liquid over the enemy's ladders. It was oil. Some were shot in the process, but nothing could stop their efforts. An old soldier, clutching his fatal wound, cried out victoriously as he tossed the lantern in his hand.

“Glory to the Empire!”

A cacophony of screams rang out from the Evergreen Infantry as they and their ladders burst into flames. The radiance was so great that it was as though the sun above had fallen to earth.

Although the Belgarian troops continued to whittle down their foe, Fort Häupert was already surrounded, and the difference in numbers was much too great. Arrows flew from every direction, and the Evergreen Infantry seemed unaffected no matter how many soldiers it lost. The mere six hundred of the imperial army were quickly exhausted.



That evening—

One corner of the fort was attacked from three sides. Jerome had stationed the most proficient soldiers there, but they were still the first to fall. The sentries followed soon after, leaving nobody to act against the enemy's ladders. It was only a short while later that the first Estaburg soldiers set foot in the fortress. They fired off one arrow after another, as if unleashing their pent-up frustration.

"Hyaaaah!"

Emboldened by the hellish training they had undergone, those stationed at Fort Häupert put up fierce resistance. Enemy troops poured into the fortress much faster than the Belgarian soldiers were able to kill them, but even then, not a single man attempted to run away.

"Don't lose! If we lose here, the fort falls!"

"The hell are you on about?!" one young soldier cried. "We're the Belgarian Army! Estaburg trash is nothing to us!" He thrust out his spear, but his best technique did nothing to stop the hail of projectiles that came upon him, nor the lone arrow that bit into his

torso. “It doesn’t hurt! Not compared to a punch from the Black Knight!”

«Urk!»

The young soldier’s spear pierced through an Estaburg infantryman.

“A’ight! Who’s next?!”

«Drop dead, Galian scum!»

“You don’t scare me one bit!”

Adrenaline had numbed his sense of pain. He no longer paid heed to his body’s limits, such that each move threatened to tear his muscles asunder. His spear shot forward as quickly as if it had been thrust by a master of the art, piercing his foe straight through the heart.

“And there’s more where that came from!”

But before the young soldier could strike again, a longsword extended from between the ranks of what should have been nothing but bowmen, severing his arm in one clean sweep.

«Worthless wretch.»

“G-Gyaaah?!”

A man stepped out into the open. He was unlike the others in the Evergreen Infantry. He wore white armor, carried a longsword, and boasted a physique that was distinctly better than the soldiers around him. He was faster to boot.

«This is for my sister!»

“N-No!”

The longsword shot toward the young soldier...only to be blocked at the last moment by a pitch-black spear. A man clad in black armor now stood at the forefront of Belgaria’s defenses.

“Hmph. I thought we’d face nothing but pesky arrows. Looks like someone here has some backbone.”

“B-Black Knight...” the soldier sputtered, no longer able to stand. His vision was already starting to fade, the darkness closing in, but he could still see his commander’s back.

“You did well, holding out until I got here. You’ve fulfilled your duty as a soldier of the Empire.”

“P-Please...” the young soldier pleaded, tears leaking from his eyes. “You have to win...”

“Win? Of course I’ll win!” Jerome roared. He thrust out his spear, but the soldier in white dodged with beast-like movements.

«For my little sister—for Juhaprecia! The commander is mine to—»

“Quit babbling in the middle of battle!”

In the blink of an eye, three consecutive thrusts bored holes in the man’s white armor.

«H-Huh...?»

“HRAAAH!”

Jerome slammed the bleeding suit of white armor into a nearby stone wall, impaling a nearby archer in the process. Only when he had finished slaughtering every enemy soldier who had made it onto the wall did reinforcements finally arrive. They were old men, the lot of them, but none were surprised by the bodies; they indifferently poured oil on the remaining ladders.

Upon realizing that their allies atop the wall had been wiped out, Estaburg unleashed another volley of arrows, but the Belgarians were already holding their wooden shields at the ready.

Jerome lowered his gaze to the stone floor—to the unmoving bodies of several young Belgian soldiers. The sun was beginning to set. It

would be near impossible for Estaburg's archers to trace the paths of their arrows in the dark, and they would have a much harder time determining whether their allies had successfully cleared the wall. Nightfall would only increase their number of unnecessary casualties.

A bugle blared, and the Evergreen Infantry separated from Fort Häupert. The wound-ridden imperial soldiers quivered at the sight.

"The enemy...retreated...?"

"Twenty thousand soldiers...retreated... They retreated..."

"We... We won..."

"H-Hurraah! We woon!"

The soldiers cheered; six hundred men had driven off twenty thousand. They may have had the advantage as the defending forces in this siege, but it was still a miraculous turn of events.

Unfortunately, it was just the first day of the attack.



Fort Häupert was like a morgue. Dead soldiers outnumbered the living. Even some of the civilians in the yard had perished from stray arrows.

Jerome sat on the stairs leading to the top of the wall, wary of an attack in the night. He shut his eyes for a moment...

...and awoke a short while later to footsteps.

"Ah..."

It was Marion.

"You didn't bring a knife today," Jerome observed.

"I don't need one when I have my sword. Not that I intend to point it at you."

"Hmph... So, how was that? We won."

“It was amazing. But what about tomorrow?”

Jerome was silent. Marion held out a cup, which he snatched from her and brought to his lips. The water seeped into his parched body.

“Tsk... Could have at least brought me some booze.”

“Alcohol won’t help your wounds.”

“You think I was wounded in a battle like that?”

“You met with the field doctor, didn’t you?”

Jerome clicked his tongue again. “That quack.”

“You are the core of our defenses. I told him to report to me.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. It was barely a scratch.”

“I see... But the soldiers, on the other hand... They’re at their limit. You can’t call me overprotective anymore. I know you understand. Close to three hundred survived, but only perhaps two hundred of them can still fight. We don’t have any reserves left... If they breach our defenses again, we won’t be able to stop them.”

“So, what? You intend to surrender?”

“W-Well...”

“I killed a man in white... An Estaburg prince, I presume. Said he was Juhaprecia’s brother, though he never gave his name...”

Marion’s breath caught in her throat; if what Jerome had said was true, the enemy army was only going to become even more ruthless. Even if those at Fort Häupert surrendered, they would all most likely be slaughtered.

“I sent a letter to Marschedt,” Marion said. “The journey isn’t that long. It should have arrived by the evening... Night at the latest.”

“Correct.”

Marion paused. “Then why haven’t we received any reinforcements?”

“Don’t ask what you already know. We were abandoned. That’s all there is to it.”

“But why?!”

“This was a throwaway fort from the start. And there’re twenty thousand Estaburg soldiers. The Seventh Army barely has thirteen thousand to work with. Sending reinforcements here would just be wasting men on a lost cause.”

Even if the Seventh Army had managed to fight off the Estaburg attack, they would have suffered great losses in the process, which would in turn weaken their defenses and make it harder for them to hold the line elsewhere. It was only natural that they would ignore the request.

“Waaah... I already knew it was true, but...but...” Tears started falling from Marion’s eyes. “We really were abandoned...”

Jerome had not come to Häupert to save the fort, per se, but he had thought that the Black Knight Brigade might mobilize in his aid nonetheless. *So, this is what it feels like to be completely abandoned...* he thought.

“I see now... It’s like a hole was punched through my chest.”

“Why did you come here?” Marion asked. “You’re not from Aphäut...”

Jerome folded his arms and cocked his head. *Good question... Did I want to achieve a magic-like victory to show that I’m in no way inferior to that tactician? Was it childish stubbornness?*

“Hmph...” After a moment spent in thought, the Black Knight gave his answer. “I told you already—I hate losing. I won’t let even a puny fort fall to the likes of Estaburg.”

Jerome was a man who refused to give up his dignity, even if that refusal meant death. *The very thought of cowering and running away—of dying old without having put up a fight... A life spent like that can eat shit.*

Marion wiped her eyes. “What should we do...?”

“It’s obvious. There’s only one thing soldiers bound for hell *can* do.”

“And what’s that?”

“Drag as many enemies down with us as we can. Kill, and kill, and then kill some more. Teach the enemy that it’s simply not worth it to pick a fight with Belgaria. That’s the duty of soldiers who’ve been left to die.”

“Then what about the civilians...?” Marion asked, her voice quavering.

“I’ll spare them knives to kill themselves with. It’s a wretched life, being a prisoner of war.”

“Waaah...” Marion was crying again.

It was a calm, quiet night—so calm that it was hard to believe they were at war and so quiet that the Black Knight could not escape the young woman’s sobs.



August 3rd—

It was a clear morning. As the sun rose, the Evergreen Infantry approached Fort Häupert again. Most of the mounted ballistae had been destroyed with flaming arrows, so the Belgarians could not attack as they had done the day before. Instead, everyone who could still move stood atop the stone walls, waiting. They had no reserves left.

“Here they come,” Marion said. She was standing beside Jerome, her eyes red and puffy.

“Hmph... One look and you can tell—they want to take the fort and kill all of us,” Jerome remarked. “They won’t retreat or change course. Unless by magic.”

That was when a strange report came from the lookout.

“Smoke rising to the east!”

Jerome cocked his head. He could see the black smoke. *Is the forest ablaze?* he wondered. *The smoke isn’t spreading far enough for a wildfire.*

Marion narrowed her eyes. “Smoke, from that direction... Could it be Estaburg’s base?”

“What?! Oi, someone get me a map!” Jerome barked. A soldier scurried off at once to meet his demand.

It seemed that Estaburg had noticed it as well. Their march halted, and a ruckus spread through their ranks. A thunderous sound echoed in the distance.

“Cannons...” Jerome muttered. The noise was coming from some ways away, but the roar was unmistakable.

“Could it be that someone’s attacking the enemy’s stronghold...?” Marion asked.

Taking on Estaburg’s stronghold was by no means a simple feat; it was presumably equipped with cannons and maintained a strong terrain advantage. Only the Seventh Army boasted the strength necessary to capture it. Lo and behold...

“It’s the Seventh Army!” one of the soldiers cried. “It’s General Coignière!”

Jerome was finally handed a map, which he closely examined with stern eyes. It was roughly five lieue (twenty-two kilometers) from Fort Häupert to Estaburg's base. Perhaps it was possible to hear cannon fire from such a distance, but if the shots truly were coming from the Estaburg stronghold, Jerome doubted that each blast would be so distinct.

Naturally, their foe was likely having the same thoughts, but the cannons were continuing to blare, and smoke was rising from the direction of their stronghold. Even an idiot could tell. While their core unit was out attacking a tiny fortress, the imperial army was taking their base.

Among the bright faces of all those stationed at Fort Häupert, Jerome alone watched the battlefield with a frown. "That trash..." he grumbled. "He courteously prepared the enemy's next course of action for them. This strategy is...!"

"They're changing course!" cried the lookout. "The army is changing course! They march east!"

"Hurraaah!"

The cheers were just as loud as they had been the day before.

"Don't look away just yet!" Jerome yelled. "This is where it really begins!"

"Eh?" Marion, who had been rejoicing with the soldiers, opened her eyes wide. "What do you mean? Won't the enemy return to their fort?"

"Just watch. His plans are never that gentle."

Soon after the Evergreen Infantry entered the eastern forest, the roar of countless firearms being discharged shook the air. It came from among the trees, and it started so suddenly that even soldiers

watching from afar cried out in shock. Of course, Estaburg's soldiers were leagues more flustered.

"Wh-What's the meaning of this?!" Marion screamed.

"An ambush," Jerome replied bluntly. "Who's to say Estaburg's the only one who can set up an ambush in the forest?"

"But who...?"

"It's gotta be the Seventh Army, right?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Eh?! Then who's attacking Estaburg's stronghold...?"

"That was all a ruse," Jerome spat. He had already deduced the plan.

"The smoke and the cannon fire were meant to deceive Estaburg's core unit into thinking their fort was under attack, when really, they were the target all along. He knew they'd return in a panic, and now that they're in a frenzy over the surprise gunshots..."

"The Black Knight Brigade!" one of the soldiers yelled, pointing into the distance from atop the wall. "I see General Coigniera's flag too!"

No matter how many forces the Seventh Army mobilized, they were going to be at a disadvantage—thirteen thousand against twenty thousand. Any engagement would result in massive losses no matter the outcome, and yet...the battle Jerome was seeing was completely one-sided. By using the forest ambushes the Evergreen Infantry excelled in against them, Belgaria had caused chaos among its enemy's ranks.

"This is our chance!" Jerome barked. "Anyone who can move, grab your spear!"

"Eeh?! What are you doing?!" Marion shrieked.

"That's *our* prey, goddammit! Like hell am I giving it up to the Seventh Army! We're sortieing! Open the gate!"

"Stop! Please! Everyone's tired..."

Marion tried to protest, but her voice was drowned out by the soldiers' gruff cries.

"Hooaaah! Let's do this!"

"Revenge!"

"I'll tear off their commander's head!"

Jerome was far from kind enough to let a fleeing foe get away, and without a rallying cry, the weary soldiers would never find the strength to return to the battlefield.

"With me, men!" Jerome yelled. "Pierce their hearts!"

Two hundred soldiers rushed through the open gates. The enemy's numbers were two magnitudes higher, but those who scattered in dismay after the ambush were no match for a unified group.

The commander of the Evergreen Infantry raised the white flag before the sun had even reached its peak. It was a crushing victory, completely unprecedented on the eastern front.



The men of the Black Knight Brigade gathered before Jerome. The knight leading them, Holger, stepped down from his horse.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

Jerome harrumphed. "I don't remember telling you to come."

"Was it too intrusive on my part? My apologies."

"This was *his* plan, wasn't it?"

"Yes... You didn't read the letter? Well, the letter sent to you did not contain the plan in detail."

"Tsk... Again." Jerome kicked at the ground. Another of the tactician's plans. Friend and foe alike were dancing on the palm of that man's hand.

“Sir Regis’s plan was founded on the assumption that Fort Häupert would survive the first day of the attack,” Holger said with a wry smile. “We needed that much time to circumvent the battlefield from Marschedt.”

“Tsk... Even our hard-fought victory was just a given to him!”

“Well, you could look at it like that... But I see it as him placing his trust in you, Sir Jerome.”

After grasping the state of the battle from Coignière’s and Jerome’s letters, Regis had proposed a plan. In fact, he had proposed several, predicting a number of possible ways the enemy might act. One such prediction had evidently hit the mark.

Holger held out the letter. “He started it off with a list of books appropriate to our situation.”

“That damn attitude is what irritates me the most!” Jerome snarled. He snatched the letter from Holger, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it on the ground.

“Incidentally... Acting as your proxy is too great of a burden for me,” Holger said. “I’m getting rather stiff shoulders, so could you come back already?”

“General!” The riders of the Black Knight Brigade dismounted and kneeled. “Please return!”

Jerome looked over them. “You lot, what was that battle back there?” he growled, sounding rather irritated. “It’s been a month—a single measly month—and you’ve become that dull already? I’ll retrain you from the ground up!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” the knights replied. Their voices were mixed with both fear and delight.

Jerome turned back to the tiny Fort Häupert. Its stone walls were scorched, its gate on the verge of falling apart. Standing outside,

soldiers and civilians stood in strict lines. Many had tears in their eyes.

“Turn to the hero, General Jerome...” Marion ordered. “All hands, salute!”

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Maid-in-Waiting

A maid-in-waiting was a woman tasked with serving and attending to ladies of the upper echelon of society. They would help their mistress apply makeup, offer them advice on the right clothing to wear, and entertain them with gossip over tea.

Maid-in-waiting were not considered servants; they were seen as noblewomen themselves and treated more like their mistress's friends. At parties, they would wear fine dresses and hang around their mistress.

Naturally, the job required a certain level of education. Maid-in-waiting were usually the daughters of lesser nobles, and while it was possible for commoners to take the role, these commoners were most often from mercantile houses.

Although Clarisse acts like a maid-in-waiting (and a private tutor and a beautician, for that matter) when she is alone with Altina, she is actually but a standard maid. A maid-in-waiting is also a watchdog of sorts, and if she truly were one, her duties would have included preventing the princess from ever being alone with Regis.

The status of maid-in-waiting varied from country to country. Outside of Belgaria, there were nations where they were seen as no more than the personal servants of the aristocracy. Companions were prepared separately.



Parapluies

During the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, umbrellas used to stave off rain did not yet exist within the Empire. The ones that did exist were instead used to block the sun, and were more appropriately known as “parasols.”

Parasols have a long and rich history, and are said to have been used more than four thousand years before the days of the young tactician. They were first fashioned around the equator in nations where the sunlight was stronger before eventually becoming a sign of nobility and an item that only the aristocracy could use.

Around five hundred years before Regis’s time came the advent of folding parasols. They were made of whalebone processed into thin strips and were so expensive that, once again, they were reserved for the noble class.

The area around the Belgarian capital saw a relatively short sunny season, so there was not much of a demand for parasols within the Empire. Still, they were brought in when the country merged with the southern kingdom around two hundred years prior, and noblewomen would carry them around as a fashion statement.

Since parasols were chosen based on appearance rather than practical use, lace versions quickly caught on. Hats and coats were used as protection from the rain instead.

Umbrellas were imported from the far east around the same time as tea leaves and fine china. It would be another thirty years before these items once carried only by noblewomen became a universal household tool.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess XII*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

I finally managed to include my short story about Black Knight Jerome. I'd written it around half a year ago, but I couldn't find a place for it back then due to page constraints. In exchange, the main story was mostly reunions and reorganizations. Not much happened, but the situation is moving along quite drastically.

As an aside, how long have Regis and Altina truly been apart? In-universe, not really that long...

The next volume is planned to be about the southern front. There's due to be a great shift in imperial history, and I would feel very blessed if you could stick around until the end.

The manga adaptation of *Altina the Sword Princess* by Aomine Tsubasa-sensei and Kagimushi-sensei is still in publication.

As for what I'm working on at the moment, there's *Millennium War Aigis: The White Empire Arc*, which I'm writing with Famitsu Bunko. It's a novelization of a game, but I've tried writing it so that it can be enjoyed as its own war story. *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord* is still running with Kodansha, and the manga version has been a lot of fun. There's also *The Fourteen-Year-Old and the Illustrator* with MF Bunko, which is a therapeutic work comedy. If you see any of them in a bookstore, why not try flipping through?

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. Thank you for the gorgeous illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Hishino-sama from Afterglow. Thank you once again.

To my editor, Wada-sama. I know I was a little hesitant with it, but thank you for your strong support on including the short story. I think it worked out nicely.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved, and to my family and friends who continue to support me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far! Thank you!

Yukiya Murasaki

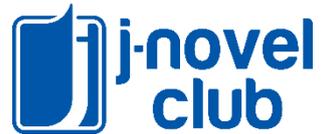
Thank you so
much for reading
volume 12!

This time, I drew
the ever-cool Jessica.

Murasaki-san,
Wada-san,
I had so much
fun drawing.
Thank you.

😊
Kissu
N





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