

XIII

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

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LTINA
the Sword Princess

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“Forming an alliance with such an influential figure has made business far smoother, and for that, you have my gratitude. The Fourth Army’s exploits have made our investment a

highly successful one.”



Third Daughter
Renoir



Vixen of the South
Elenore

Généralissime
Altina



“Um...
‘Investment’?”

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Altina’s rigorous studies had taught her a lot about the importance of money but her blank, perplexed expression made it clear that she didn’t quite follow.

“What...?”

“I **confessed**
my feelings to
Mr. Regis and
now it seems he
is feeling quite
bothered
about it.”

Altina had frozen in place.

Altina's Maid
Clarisse



Bang!

The roar of a gunshot pierced the air and a single hole opened up in the set of armor leaned against the wall, right where the heart would have been had a human been wearing it. Eric swiftly loaded a new bullet, took stance again, and—

Bang!

This time, he blew open a hole in the brow of the helmet. Those watching were astir.

Imperial Sharpshooter
Eric



ALTA

the Sword Princess

Characters



Marie Quatre
Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgian 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.



Regis Aurick

First-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.



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.



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.



Eric Mickaël
de Blanchard

A Belgian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay'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.



Carlos Liam
Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgian Empire. While being first in line to the throne, he was sickly from birth. After coughing up blood and collapsing following a banquet, he disappeared from the public eye for an extended period of time, but has since made his return.



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.



Heinrich Trois
Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgian 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

Reigning emperor of the Belgian 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 seized full control of the Empire.



High
Britannia

M E R

Varden

Langobarti

Fort Volks

Verseilles

Estaburg

Aloe-Marroe

Belgarian
Empire

Sembione

Hispania

Etruria

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. But as the Belgarian Empire shakes under the weight of a 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 Gilbert.

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.

In the liberation of Grebeauvoir, a fortified city northwest of the Belgian capital, Regis demonstrates his excellent knack for commanding troops. This show of wit, however, also establishes him as a considerable threat to Latrielle's reign. It is with this knowledge that the soon-to-be emperor 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; Bourguine, an infamous activist; and even Bastian, the third prince. After obtaining testimony from Grand Chamberlain Beclard, he has *The Weekly Quarry* run 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 Verseilles with the Fourth Army in tow. Soon, the unit most revered for its achievements in the recent war comes face-to-face with the First Army, said to be the strongest in the Empire. Tensions flare, but Regis finally reunites with the princess, and civil war is narrowly avoided.

Latrielle soon takes the throne, after which Altina is appointed *généralissime* and dispatched to assist the struggling southern front. But as the Fourth Army marches on, they happen upon a most

unexpected visitor. She is none other than Elenore Ailred Winn de Tiraso Laverde, Vixen of the South and the daughter of a ducal house.

“Regis, it pains me to make a request like this when we haven’t seen each other in so long... Please, help us.”

As she makes her appeal, a fierce gust of wind sweeps her attendant’s parasol up into the air.

Prelude: Negotiating with the Vixen

Imperial Year 851, August 23rd—

The westward sun illuminated the plains near Wollalen, twenty lieue south of the imperial capital of Verseilles. A lace parasol danced in the breeze, and the girl who had been holding it looked like she was about to cry.

“Ah...” she gasped.

Elenore placed a hand on the girl’s head. “You don’t have to worry, Renoir,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

The girl shook her head.

Regis had done some digging into House Tiraso Laverde, and he recognized this name as that of the family’s third daughter. *So, she isn’t an attendant...* he thought to himself.

Elenore’s little sister did not seem to have come simply because she needed to be looked after; rather, it seemed that she was tagging along to learn the family business, even at such a young age. House Tiraso Laverde did manage a booming business in the south, after all.

“Shall I fetch your parasol for you?” Regis asked.

Elenore nodded. “That would be wonderful, Regis.”

“Of course. For now, please, come into the tent. This doesn’t seem like it will be a short conversation.”

She nodded again and followed Regis inside; so, too, did the young girl named Renoir. Regis asked one of the nearby soldiers to track down the parasol.

The tent, which had been prepared in a hurry, contained one square table and six chairs. Regis pulled out two of the chairs for the sisters—an action that came naturally to any decent man raised in

the Empire. Belgaria was strongly patriarchal, but men were taught to be courteous to women from a very young age.

Regis, Elenore, and Renoir were the only ones in the tent.

“Now then, might I ask what the situation is?” Regis asked.

“It all started around the time the war against High Britannia settled down. Yes, that would have to be when the previous emperor passed...” Elenore began. She spoke in a manner that was noticeably masculine; it was uncommon for women to have any involvement in business, politics, or military matters, so perhaps that was one concession she had to make.

“Around his death? Hm...” Regis recalled the situation from June. Not even three months had passed since then, but with everything that had happened, it felt as though three years had gone by.

“Prince Latrielle—oh, excuse me, I suppose I should say ‘His Majesty’ now—issued us an order through the Ministry of Military Affairs. He requested that we give him money.”

“He made a levy?” Regis asked. “How much has he asked for?”

“Oh, no. He called it a temporary collection for the war effort. The south didn’t face much damage compared to the west and the central territories, so as far as he was concerned, we should have more to provide.”

“I see.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable response, Regis thought. Such calls for aid were by no means limited to times of war; when there were floods, droughts, or pandemics that impacted only particular imperial territories, other regions would often provide assistance. This was only possible due to the vast area the Empire occupied.

Elenore sighed. “I am personally in favor of sending support to war zones. I wanted to assist as much as I could— But it only makes sense

for me to dole out for the war effort if I do not have a war of my own. Yes?”

“Naturally.”

“Right after we received the collection notice, there came the news of Juhaprecia’s passing.”

“Indeed.”

Latrielle had assassinated the sixth consort, Juhaprecia, along with the emperor. That said, based on what Regis had heard from Berard, the former grand chamberlain, there was reason to suspect that Juhaprecia had been the one to instigate things.

“The sixth consort hailed from Estaburg to the east, and that has naturally put a strain on international relations,” Elenore said.

“Belgaria was at war with Estaburg for a while, and it was only through Juhaprecia’s marriage that a ceasefire was reached,” Regis added. “I was informed that hostilities finally broke out the other day.”

A letter had come from the Seventh Army and the Black Knight Brigade on the eastern front. There had apparently been some gains made by the Belgian forces stationed at a fort on the border, and they had received a thank-you letter from the commander there.

Regis felt rather apologetic about the whole matter. The commander of the distant fortress was the granddaughter of the late Lieutenant General Bargesonne, a man who had succumbed to High Britannian gunfire during the Battle of La Frengé. Regis had witnessed the man’s death from his position as the tactician of the Beilschmidt border regiment.

His blood is on my hands... Regis told himself. If only he had been able to negotiate more successfully before the battle or implement the proper tactics... Then, the outcome would have no doubt been

more favorable. Those thoughts ran through his mind even now; he continued to reflect on his shortcomings at every waking moment.

Regis couldn't help himself. Marquis Thénézay, the first man to ever hire him, had similarly met his end after refusing one of the tactician's plans. Was there anything he could have done to keep the man alive? Was there any way to lower the number of casualties? Was the battle truly unavoidable from the get-go?

There was not a single battle that Regis did not regret.

"Now then, Regis..." Elenore said. "You must be wondering—how could the start of the war with Estaburg affect our home in the south?"

"I would presume because Estaburg is tied through marriage to the southern Hispanian Empire."

"You're well-informed."

"It's a common set piece used in stage plays. There can be unnecessary trouble when writers base their plays on Belgian nobles, so many of them use foreign countries for their dramas."

"Now that you mention it...I remember applauding a story that went along those lines."

"Ah, to attend such a performance..."

Regis had read scripts before, but he had never properly attended a play—the standard admissions fee was almost as much as his weekly salary during his days as a fifth-grade administrative officer, far out of reach for a poor commoner. Money was no longer an issue, but with everything that was going on, he highly doubted that he could find the time for such a luxury.

"But yes, the matter with Hispania," Elenore went on. "They are proclaiming that Juhaprecia must have been murdered."

"Understandably so."

“Hispania has not attempted an invasion, but the Etruscan Army has already taken action, presumably with their support.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

High Britannia’s occupation of Grebeauvoir had been such a major event that not much else was discussed around the capital. Around the same time, however, the theocratic Kingdom of Etruria had advanced upon one of the Empire’s southern forts.

I expected the soldiers stationed there to be able to fight them off pretty easily... Regis mused. For such a sturdy fortress on the front lines to have fallen to Etruria came as a considerable shock to him.

“I’m not too versed in military matters, mind you, but a knight dispatched from the central territories was apparently more competent than the Sixth Army’s commander,” Elenore said. “That man was called back to the First Army, so his absence may have led to this failure.”

“I see...”

“I believe it was Baron Zemault, although I may be misremembering the name.”

“Ah!” Regis slapped his knee in realization. The man in question was the young new commander of the First Army’s White Wolf Brigade. He was skilled as both a fighter and a negotiator—so much so that Regis had dearly wished to make him an ally.

“Do you know him, Regis?”

“I’ve met him once, on the battlefield. He’s someone I certainly wouldn’t want to make an enemy of. Now that you mention it, he did say he was summoned from the south.”

“Hm... The Sixth Army was routed, and Sembione fell. It was a fine city that our house conducted much business in.”

Regis was starting to piece the situation together. Latrielle was demanding money from the south to aid a war zone, but the south was a struggling war zone in itself.

“If we explain the circumstances to the Ministry...” Regis muttered. “Ah, but the Ministry no longer exists. The First Army manages such matters directly now. Why not explain the situation to them?”

“We have, of course, but our territory is vast. They determined that the damage around Sembione would not majorly impact us.”

“How much *has* the damage impacted you? Honestly speaking.”

“As things stand, we’re estimated to lose around ten percent of our net annual profit.”

“So, not a huge amount, but not a small amount either.”

“If only that were all. If we accept their demands this time, we can expect them to come back with even greater ones. That is why I shan’t obey them—at least, not until the enemy has been driven away.”

Regis folded his arms and cocked his head. Elenore’s fears were certainly well-founded. Latrielle intended to expand the nation’s war fronts, and to that end, he would need to gather funds by whatever means necessary—even by force.

Elenore sighed. “For them to press us for money while offering no protection in return makes them no better than bandits. As the rallying force of the southern nobles, I cannot answer these demands under our current circumstances. But no matter how much I want to oppose the matter, our house lacks the soldiers. Worst-case scenario, we may be deemed rebels, and the army will deal with us before Etruria even has the chance.”

“You will need to proceed with caution.”

“Ah.” Renoir suddenly spoke up, having kept silent the entire conversation. There was a ruckus brewing outside the tent.

“What could it be...?” Regis murmured as he rose from his seat. It was a little too soon for the soldier to have retrieved the missing parasol.

“Hyah!”

All of a sudden, the opening folds of the tent were smacked aside with a spirited cry, and in came a crimson-haired young woman, her red eyes narrowed in a sharp glare. Her pale, porcelain limbs were like works of fine art when she stood still, but currently, they were swinging about in an exaggerated manner, her perfectly molded fingers waving at Regis’s nose.

“Regis! Why didn’t you call me?!”



“Princess?! What’s wrong?!” Regis exclaimed. He would usually call the woman by her nickname, “Altina,” but he was deliberately more cordial when others were around to hear.

“Hmph!” She puffed up her cheeks. “No one told me you were meeting with her *alone!*”

“No, no. Her little sister’s here too.”

Altina’s expression relaxed into a smile the moment she noticed Renoir. She was surprisingly fond of children, although her forceful entry had made the young girl quite fearful.

“My apologies,” Elenore said. “My dear sister is not yet disciplined enough to interact with customers. Unlike Fanrine and me, she is anxious by nature.”

“She doesn’t resemble you at all,” Altina remarked.

“We do not share the same mother. Perhaps that is why our personalities are so different.”

“Right. Anyway...” Altina swiftly moved the conversation along. She had witnessed something similar with her own siblings, who all came from different mothers, so she saw no reason to question Elenore’s logic.

Elenore wearily brushed aside her black hair. “I did not come here today to seduce Regis. If he is considering a new occupation, however, then I am more than willing to welcome him.”

Altina slammed a hand on the table. “Absolutely not!”

“Is that not for Regis to decide? Have you done your best to improve his work conditions, little Ms. *Généralissime?*”

“Erk...”

“I have my own goals and responsibilities, so I will not be leaving my position,” Regis said, intruding before the conversation could stray in a peculiar direction. “My apologies, Princess... I thought you would be tired from the march, so I tried to handle this on my own.”

“Ah, yeah... Well, I’d usually be perfectly fine with that, but...” Altina mulled over her words. Her unusual wariness came from the lipstick that had been smeared on Regis’s cheek during the celebrations in April. Regis himself no longer remembered this; he had been at death’s door, once, twice, even three times since, and the memories were overwritten by far stronger ones.

“All teasing aside,” Elenore said, “I am here to request aid from our newly appointed *généralissime*. I will, of course, repay you in kind, but...how about taking a seat for now?”

“Yes, I suppose I should.” Altina settled in a chair beside Regis and took a deep breath. In an instant, her expression turned serious, and she spoke with an earnestness that seemed unthinkable considering how she had acted on her arrival. “Firstly, I am terribly grateful for the massive support I have received from the Gaillarte Garden Party. Thank you.”

Regis’s eyes widened. “It’s almost like you’re a real princess.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, er... Well, you... I mean, I’m surprised you can sound so princess-like, Princess.”

“It’s not like this is the first time I’ve spoken seriously.”

“True, but...”

“I am not ignorant of the movement of money. We have been in numerous engagements since the national day celebrations—the Beilschmidt border regiment became the Fourth Army, and now the *généralissime*’s council... And throughout all this, it has been thanks

to the support of the southern nobles that our soldiers' wages were never a denier short."

Elenore nodded. "I'm glad that you understand."

An increase in troops would usually mean an increase in capital received from the Ministry of Military Affairs. However, the rate at which Altina had gained troops was abnormal—so much so that the Ministry had not been able to keep up. In addition to this, the Fourth Army hired plenty of on-site workers and mercenaries, neither of which were eligible to be funded by the nation. It was because of their funding from the south that they had been able to continue fighting.

"And yet, even with all your support..." Altina lowered her head. "I couldn't beat Latrielle."

"Raise your head, Your Highness..." Elenore said. "Latrielle may have taken the throne, but we are still alive. The battle is not over yet."

"Right. That's exactly it."

"We of the Gaillarte Garden Party do not hold what has transpired against you. There was a time when we had no military backing and were exploited as a result. We're far better off now—and we can thank the Fourth Army for that."

"Really?"

"Let me put it like this... Now that you have our backing, you wouldn't stay silent if we were pressured into an unfair transaction, would you?"

"Of course not."

"Forming an alliance with such an influential figure has made business far smoother, and for that, you have my gratitude. The Fourth Army's exploits have made our investment a highly successful one."

“Um... ‘Investment’?” Altina’s rigorous studies had taught her a lot about the importance of money but her blank, perplexed expression made it clear that she didn’t quite follow.

I can’t blame her. Investing is something that few people truly understand, Regis thought. “She’s saying that your performance has improved the positions of all those in support of you.”

“Ah, is that so?” Altina asked. “All right. Good.”

Elenore smiled. “My hope is that our mutually beneficial relationship will continue.”

“I heard that a city in the south was taken. Is everything okay?”

“The Sixth and Eighth Armies were forced to retreat at Etruria’s invasion,” Regis interjected, taking over the conversation from there. “Sembione has already fallen, and in their current situation, House Tiraso Laverde will struggle to continue providing their support.”

Altina rose from her chair. “I don’t mean for us! How are the townsfolk?!”

“We’ve sent scouts, but...we don’t yet have any details.”

“Viscount Dorvale of the Sixth Army proposed a retreat when the invasion was still in its early stages, so evacuation was not an issue,” Elenore weighed in. “That said, much livestock and produce was abandoned.”

“I see...” Altina’s face remained tense, but she settled back into her chair. It was then that Regis suddenly realized something.

Sir Eddie belonged to the Sixth Army, didn’t he? He might know Dorvale. Maybe I should ask him later...

Regis lacked information, and the Sixth Army had spent so long in the south without any conspicuous achievements that they were shockingly absent from any military records. The fact that its commander had not been summoned to the coronation of the new

emperor spoke volumes to their treatment in the military and in high society.

There were no doubt issues with the Sixth Army, and as the marshal general, Latrielle had surely picked up on them. But for what reason was he sending Altina's unit? Was it really just to bring a speedy resolution to the conflict, or was there some ulterior motive?

"There's still a lot more I need to find out..." Regis mumbled to himself.

"My apologies for the interruption, Princess. I've finished preparing the tea," came a voice from outside the tent. It was Clarisse. She spoke not in her usual cheery tone, but in the emotionless intonation she used in the presence of strangers.

"Come in," Altina replied. "You'll have a cup, won't you, Elenore?"

"I would consider it an honor to have tea with a princess," Elenore responded. "I have no reason to refuse."

Renoir looked up with sparkling eyes, a sudden contrast to how stiff and scared she had seemed throughout their entire conversation thus far. "A tea party..." she mumbled, her voice so faint that it almost faded into the wind.

✧ ✧ ✧

Umber liquid swirled in Elenore's teacup. "You're using very high-quality tea leaves," she remarked, having made her evaluation from the aroma alone.

"Oh, really?" Altina asked as she nonchalantly took a mouthful of tea. Clarisse must have opted to serve them a different type than usual. Regis followed suit, taking a meek sip himself, only to realize that his palate was not refined enough to evaluate the quality.

Elenore held her cup at eye level and gazed at the steaming liquid inside. “Do you know how much these particular tea leaves cost, Your Highness?” she asked.

“Huh? Um... They’re not cheap, but we need to serve the appropriate tea when we have special guests.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong—I don’t mean to criticize you for your spending. Expensive leaves should absolutely be saved for times like this. What I mean is, the price of tea has risen as of late. In fact, some leaves are now worth their weight in silver. Did you know that?”

Regis nearly did a spit take, while Altina responded with an immediate grimace. “That much?!” she cried.

“Only for the highest quality, of course. But even the lower-grade varieties are climbing in price. The reason lies with Hispania.”

“Hm?” Altina cocked her head quizzically.

“You must be referring to the pirates,” Regis said, speaking in the princess’s stead. “For a long time now, Hispania has been disguising its own naval ships as pirate vessels to attack Belgarian merchant vessels.”

Elenore nodded. “And the pirates are growing especially active. High Britannia’s trade boom raised the value of merchant goods, and now, Belgaria does not have enough vessels to guard its cargo ships.”

“Indeed. Quite a few of them sank, after all.”

Altina struck the table with a tightly clenched fist. “Attacking merchant ships is cowardly!” she exclaimed.

“Perhaps, but such is the norm there,” Elenore replied. “We trade with them, and then on the way home, they ambush us and shake us down for all we’re worth.”

“Well, they’re despicable!”

“Only to foreigners. Rumor has it they are upright, dutiful, and even philanthropic when dealing with their own people. Not that I’ve ever met a Hispaniard... I’ve been too focused on matters within Belgaria.”

“Grr...” Altina pursed her lips.

Regis knew about these rumors as well. “Belgaria should finish its steam engine within the year,” he said. “All other aspects of our vessels should remain largely the same as our old sailing ships, so it shouldn’t take us long to upgrade our navy. The sea routes should quiet down eventually.”

“How long will that take?” Elenore asked.

“Let’s see... Three years to build the ships, but we won’t see a decrease in attacks right away. It may be a few years after that before we start to feel the effects.”

“Right, right... In that case, it might be a good idea for us to start selling our tea leaves before the market price drops again.”

“As business-focused as ever, I see.”

“Indeed. But what we do with our tea leaves is by no means the matter at hand; we face more pressing issues in the present. Dangers at sea have already limited our trade routes, and if we allow Etruria to impede us on land as well, we won’t have many options left.”

“We’ll do something about the land routes,” Regis assured the noblewoman. “That’s what we came here for, after all.”

“I’m counting on it. Things are becoming so dire that some nobles from the Gaillarte Garden Party have considered pledging their allegiance to Hispania.”

“That would be troublesome...” Regis muttered. Such an act would be considered an act of rebellion, and the offending houses wouldn’t be suppressed so easily once they had foreign aid. “Please tell

everyone in the Gaillarte Garden Party that all enemies invading the south will soon be driven back by *Généralissime* Argentina. They won't be kept waiting long."

"Very well. I shall pass on the message. I'm sure they will trust your words, Regis."

"I would much rather they trusted the princess..."

"One and the same," Elenore said with a giggle. She then relaxed into her hair and exhaled deeply, signifying that she had spoken everything on her mind.

Regis placed a finger to his lower lip. "May I ask something? About Latrielle's demands—why not settle the matter with goods instead of money?"

"I can't imagine any amount of wheat would be enough."

"Not wheat. Guns. His Majesty is considering the mass production of rifles, and he's going to need as many as he can get."

Elenore leaned forward, looking rather amused by the suggestion. "I find it hard to believe the army would involve the *nouveau noblesse* in a matter of national secrecy...but for you to have proposed it, there must be some promise. Tell me more."

"I would hardly call this a matter of national secrecy—our new Fusil 851 is ultimately nothing more than an imitation of the High Britannian Snider. A moment, if you please..." During the war against High Britannia, the Empire had secured several thousand Sniders. Regis pulled one such rifle from his personal belongings and set it down on the table. "It's more complicated than a sword, but... Look closely. Do you see the parting lines on the edges here? All these parts are simple iron casts. If you can take this gun apart and make some molds, creating imitations of your own should be easy."

“Hm...” Elenore stared at the rifle, her eyes completely serious. If she really were instructed to produce the Fusil 851, she would most likely receive the blueprints.

“Rather than paying with money, why not set up a factory?” Regis asked. “Your first batch will no doubt be seized as payment, but if you have the facilities, nothing would stop you from producing more and selling them to the army.”

“Mm-hmm... That is an appealing tale, but the nobles from the central regions would never part with the exclusive rights to the business.”

“Truth be told, the central nobles will struggle to even involve themselves. Iron circulation around the capital is regulated by the blacksmiths’ union in Rouenne. They may not be nobles, but their influence is far greater, in a sense. First-rate blacksmiths will refuse to do business with anyone who gets on the union’s bad side.”

Blacksmiths would make swords and armor by hand, and they were also responsible for making any required adjustments or repairs. Any nobles who earned their ire would soon find themselves unable to maintain their armies.

“Should the central nobles not be communicating with these blacksmiths, then?” Elenore asked.

“They will need to if they want to start producing and selling rifles themselves,” Regis replied. “However, with blacksmiths involved, each gun will cost an exorbitant amount to make. The attention to detail will almost certainly be unmatched...but it will not be worth the investment.”

“Oh?”

“First-rate blacksmiths are a proud sort; nobody who would produce anything short of perfection would find themselves welcome in Rouenne. For this reason, they’ll produce each part to the best

possible standard...but only a select few parts actually require such precision.”

“You certainly are knowledgeable.”

“My brother-in-law has a shop in Rouenne.”

“I see...” Elenore said, nodding her understanding. “So, in the time it takes a first-rate blacksmith to create a first-rate article, we can make a fortune from selling shoddy knockoffs.”

“No, no... They need to work properly. There are lives on the line.”

Elenore grinned. “That was a joke. I’ll ensure they are operational.”

“As you should. It’s settled, then—the guns should remain simple and practical, free of any embellishments that would require unnecessary labor.”

“That doesn’t sound very Belgarian.”

“Well, these are counterfeits of the High Britannian model to begin with... Not to mention, the fundamental technologies were invented in Germania. History books note that the merits of the invention were never properly recognized in the inventor’s motherland and that, after prototypes were used to suppress a civil war, other nations were quick to snatch and study them for themselves.”

“We’re getting off track again...” Altina muttered.

“But yes, the Fusil 851 seems to use rubber,” Regis said, returning to his original point. “You can only find rubber of a high enough quality in the south, which puts you at a further advantage for the production of guns.”

“That makes sense,” Elenore said.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons Latrielle had sent Altina’s unit south. If rubber circulation were allowed to stagnate, it would severely hinder firearm production.

“That is the most advice I can offer,” Regis said. “Our liberation of Sembione will come swiftly—I can promise you that. I ask only that you discuss the matter of the new firearms with His Majesty.”

Elenore gave a meaningful smile. “You may leave the matter to me; securing orders from royalty is my specialty. That said, Regis... Are you not forgetting the most important thing?”

“Pardon...?”

“How do you benefit from all this?”

Altina’s eyes seemed to light up with interest; she had not discussed the matter with Regis, so she did not know the answer either.

“Are you hoping to procure some of these products through...less-than-legal channels?” Elenore asked in a hushed voice.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Regis replied. “The factory will no doubt be under constant surveillance, and as I said before, manufacturing these rifles is far from difficult.” To procure some himself, he would only need to set up his own factory.

Elenore paused for a moment, deep in thought. As she sat there, frozen, pensive, she looked as though she had come straight from a painting. There was no denying that she was a beautiful woman.

“I can think of several possible goals you may have...but none would necessitate what you have proposed to me,” she said.

“Perhaps there’s more to my intentions than you would assume, then.”

“Hm... So your true motivations lie elsewhere.”

“Correct. I will, however, need to return to the drawing board if your house doesn’t take control of the nation’s gun production. There are other conditions I will need to rely on...”

Elenore giggled and made no attempt to pursue the matter any further, much to Regis's surprise. "The fewer people who know your scheme, the better," she said. "I'll make you reveal it all only when necessary."

"Thank you."

"I knew it," Altina said, staring at Regis with wide eyes. "You haven't given up hope. You're still plotting all sorts of things."

"You haven't given up either, right?" Regis asked.

"Of course not!" Altina exclaimed, puffing out her chest.

Elenore stood up, a smile playing on her lips, and then bowed to the princess. "Please secure the peace and stability of these lands," she said.

"I'll do everything I can! And with Regis around, we're going to be fine!"

Regis could already feel the immense pressure being casually placed upon him. He was by no means confident that he could succeed, but he chose not to voice his doubts. After enduring so many battles, he had discovered that taking on a weak attitude was completely pointless. Securing trust was crucial in his position.

I won't make the same mistake again.

Once their conversation had reached its conclusion, they all exited the tent. Elenore was about to leave when Regis suddenly called out to her. "Ah, that's right... Mrs. Elenore, please hold on a second," he said.

"Yes?"

"The truth is, there's someone I think you should meet."

"Whoever could that be?"

"Do you know Elize Archibald, by chance?"

“Oh...” Elenore looked ahead with narrowed eyes. “So she’s back, is she?”

Elenore agreed to meet with Elize, but she kept the encounter brief, insisting that it was a matter best settled quickly. Once that was done, Elenore started on her journey to the capital, dead set on negotiating with Emperor Latrielle.

It was a short while later that the Fourth Army met with the forces stationed in the south. Elize would need to remain Regis’s guest, at least for the time being.

Chapter 1: The Sixth and Eighth Armies

Altina's Fourth Army resumed its march, and Regis was once again shaken about inside his carriage. Clarisse the maid was occupying the seat across from him, as per usual. She was normally quite talkative when there was nobody else around, and she was relentless with her teasing...but these past few days, she would more often stare at him in silence with a smile on her face.

"Um... Is something wrong?" Regis asked after finally mustering his courage. "I may be mistaken, but you don't seem like your usual self."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Are you sure you aren't just imagining it, Mr. Regis?"

"Well, I hope I am..."

"In fact...perhaps what changed was your frame of mind."

"Per...haps."

A few days prior, Regis had found the opportunity to sit and talk with Clarisse for the first time since their reunion. That was when she had said that she "treasured him dearly"—and not in her usual joking or teasing manner. He hadn't thought too much about it, and he was sure she had just said it to see the troubled look on his face, but...

Wait, was that her saying she has feelings for me?! Regis suddenly thought. *No, that's inconceivable...* He shook his head, unable to believe that someone would feel so affectionately about him. But, in that case, what was the meaning behind Clarisse's words?

"Hmm..." Regis folded his arms as he pondered the situation. He was unable to settle down. Had he known more about the situation on the southern front, he might have been able to concentrate on

devising some strategies...but unfortunately, that information was still being gathered.

There came an abrupt knock on the carriage door. Regis looked out the window to see Altina, riding beside them on her trusty steed.

“Got a moment?” the princess asked.

“Go right ahead,” Regis replied. He opened the small window at the front of the cabin and asked the driver to stop.

“C’mon, who do you take me for?” Altina asked with a wry smile. “I can hop aboard without you even having to slow down.”

“Please. You’re the *généralissime* now,” Regis replied. “I don’t want you to do anything that would make you look childish.”

“Princess...” Clarisse added, watching the princess with cautioning eyes.

Faced with such stern opposition, Altina meekly conceded. She left her horse to one of her subordinates, boarded the carriage once it had come to a stop, and took a seat beside Clarisse. “Eddie’s coming with us,” she said.

“He is?” Regis asked.

“He said there are a few things you’ll want to hear before you meet up with the Sixth Army.”

“Right. There are a few things I want to ask him too.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t surprise me that you haven’t had a chance; by the time we’ve set up camp and finished supper, he’s usually out like a light.”

Altina had left out the rather crucial detail that she and Eddie would normally spar with each other before and after their meals—or did she simply see that as part of “supper”? As Regis contemplated this, he met Clarisse’s gaze.

“.....”

“.....”

Both remained silent. Altina glanced between them a few times and then addressed the elephant in the room. “Hmm? Something doesn’t feel right... Did something happen?”

She certainly was sharp—despite not having a shred of tangible evidence, she had picked up on the mood in an instant. For a few days now, Regis had thought that a strange air was hanging between him and Clarisse.

Clarisse smiled. “I confessed my feelings to Mr. Regis and now it seems he is feeling quite bothered about it.”

“What...?” Altina asked. She had frozen in place and was exuding quite the terrifying aura.

“Oh my, Princess...” Clarisse giggled. “I’ve never seen you make a face like that before. And for Mr. Regis, no less. Oh, what I would give to be in his position...”

“A-Are you serious, Clarisse?!”

“About what?”

“A-About Regis! Th-That you—”

“Of course I am, Princess. Why, there isn’t anyone in the Belgarian Empire who hates Mr. Regis. Ah, well, we can’t be so sure about Emperor Latrielle. What about you, Princess?”

“Eh? Umm...”

“If you had to pick between loving and hating him...”

“I mean, I guess I... Wait, why are those my only options?!”

Clarisse sighed. “Hah... My princess is getting quicker on the uptake,” she muttered, her shoulders slumped forward.

“Why do you look so disappointed about that?!”

“Hmm... I suppose that’s not so bad, though.”

As he listened to their conversation from the opposite bench, Regis had a sudden realization. “Ms. Clarisse, when you said that I was dear to you...did you mean in the same way that Altina is?”

Clarisse giggled again. “My, my, Mr. Regis. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Phew... I-I see.” Regis exhaled several days’ worth of sighs all at once, but Altina was not quite so easily convinced.

“Is that true?” Altina asked. “Are you being honest, Clarisse?”

“Do you think I would ever lie to you, Princess?” the maid replied.

“You do. Quite often.”

“Oho, she’s catching on... Sound the alarms.”

“Don’t cover it up with a joke, Clarisse. Are you being honest?”

Clarisse cocked her head, her face locked in a smile. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking. “To be perfectly honest, I think Mr. Regis is a very appealing man,” she said. “He is the hero who saved Belgaria—an unprecedented commoner who rose to first-grade admin officer by his own merits. And as the *généralissime*’s tactician, his authority rivals that of a minister’s aide.”

“Y-Yeah...” Altina replied. Her expression was growing more anxious by the second. Regis wasn’t faring much better; he itched all over and was starting to feel very unsettled.

It was then that Clarisse’s expression turned serious. “But is there any woman out there who wants to live with a man who spends every last denier he has on books?” she asked.

“Erk...” Altina and Regis croaked in tandem.

“I do like Mr. Regis. I’d even go as far as to say that I love him. That is how I truly feel—but I mean it a little differently from how you’re imagining it, Princess. I have my own dreams for the future, so a destitute life surrounded by books is a bit... You know.”

“I...have no rebuttal,” Regis conceded, looking down at his feet.

“A-Aha ha... Well, that’s what makes him Regis!” Altina exclaimed. She was trying to lighten the atmosphere, but her laugh was noticeably drier than usual.

That kinda stung...

“Hey, Clarisse, what’s your dream future like?” Altina asked, trying to change the topic. “Do you have an ideal man or something?”

“My ideal man...” Clarisse repeated. “Someone with a lot of money.”

“Hmm...” Altina’s lips twitched, while Regis fought the growing urge to flop down onto the floor of the carriage.

So, this is reality...

He was praised as a national hero, he had achieved a historic promotion...but Clarisse was right—there was no woman alive who would consider spending their future with such a devout bibliophage.

“Right... I knew that,” Regis muttered. He wiped his eyes and immediately cracked open a book.

I knew it. This is the only place for me. Books are such a comfort. I can forget all about my grief, anxiety, and regret. Aah, what a wondrous world of words!

“Hey! Don’t start reading in the middle of a conversation, Regis!” Altina bared her teeth at him, but this was absolutely necessary for him to maintain himself. “And what was that you just mumbled to yourself?!”

“Wait, did I say that out loud?!”

As their squabbling continued, an overjoyed smile played on Clarisse’s lips.

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Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac: the head of a house hailed as the Emperor’s Sword, entrusted with the *Défendre Sept*, the seventh treasured blade of the Belgarian Empire. He sported unkempt hair and was dressed in rags, such that he looked too shameful to be a soldier, let alone a duke. A new recruit had once mistaken him for a mercenary and ordered him to carry boxes—and the man had obliged, saying that he had nothing better to do.

“Yo, Regis! Huh? Your eyes are a little red.”

Regis offered a weak laugh. “Well, I was...crying...a little bit,” he admitted.

“Hmm? That so?”

Eddie said no more on the matter and plopped down into the seat beside Regis; he was a man who rarely sweat the small things. Now there were four people in the carriage.

“So, anyway—how’s the south looking?” Eddie asked.

“The messenger just returned,” Regis replied. They had made contact with the Sixth Army and now had a more concrete grasp of the war. He spread a rudimentary map over the carriage’s simple table. “Twenty thousand Etruscans have invaded Belgarian territory. After taking seven forts of various sizes, they managed to march upon Sembione one week ago.”

Sembione was just about as sturdy as any other stronghold in the Empire...yet for some reason, the Sixth and Eighth Armies had conceded it incredibly easily.

Eddie furrowed his brow. “They’re investing a good deal of troops. If they entered the city a week ago, don’t you reckon they’re already on the move again?”

“It’s certainly possible,” Regis replied, “but considering the distance they’ve covered, it would be wiser for them to wait for supplies. They need to rest too.”

“So they’ll be fully prepared for the next attack?”

Regis nodded. “The Sixth and Eighth Armies have fallen back to Aloe-Marroe. There is a large lake to the north, and while the ramparts are relatively low, they’ll fare much better there than fighting on the open plains.”

“So, they chose Aloe-Marroe for their decisive battle?”

“There is an even sturdier fortress farther north...but if we pull them back that far, the Empire will lose a third of its southern territories.”

Altina looked at Regis quizzically. “During the occupation of Grebeauvoir, didn’t you say to withdraw to more defensible positions?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Regis said. “The front line was drawn back to a fort outside Mordol. Grebeauvoir was essentially abandoned.”

“For the sake of pacifism?”

“It had nothing to do with peace; it was just more efficient. Having a more defensible position means you don’t have to invest as many soldiers.”

“Then why not have the Sixth and Eighth Armies retreat to this sturdy northern fortress? Is it because of Elenore’s request?”

Regis shook his head. “House Tirasio Laverde is an important backer of the Fourth Army, and this war is putting them through a lot—that much is true. However, Aloe-Marroe was not decided upon as the battle site simply for a swift counterattack.”

Altina and Eddie listened in silence, as did Clarisse—although she never intruded on military matters anyway.

“The southern territories make up an agricultural zone the Belgarian Empire cannot stand to lose,” Regis explained. “The land isn’t even fully developed, but its output of wheat, beans, and millet makes up for half of the Empire’s total harvest.”

“That much?!” Altina exclaimed.

“If we lose a third of the south, we can expect wheat prices to double. The same goes for the cost of lemons and oranges. We would also lose all of our progress cultivating tomatoes, potatoes, and corn brought in from the new world.”

“That’s a huge deal!”

“Grebeauvoir had its own local specialties, so the decision to cede the city was not a light one...but this is different. We cannot afford to give up these territories.”

“Yeah! You don’t need to tell me twice!” Altina exclaimed, her hands balled into tight fists. “We need to secure them, no matter what!”

“Even now, we don’t have enough farmland for the rapidly growing population. I personally think we should give up on wars and focus on agriculture...” Regis noted. Most of these ideas were laid out in Professor Bouter’s book, *Southern Reform*.

Eddie gave a casual shrug. “Even if we didn’t have our crops to worry about, Latrielle wouldn’t take too kindly to us pulling the line back farther than we need to.”

“Ha ha... I can see that. He had quite a lot to say about flooding Grebeauvoir...” Regis noted. They all seemed to be on the same page for reclaiming the lost territory. “Sir Eddie, you used to be part of the Sixth Army, correct?”

“Yeah... For around half a year, to put down Marquis Trosa’s insurrection,” Eddie replied, sounding rather fed up. “Those were hard times.”

“Did you have Lieutenant General Bernard Jean de Dorvale as your commander?” Regis asked. “In practice, not just in name.” Nobles usually served as the commanders of their personal armies, but it was not uncommon for someone better versed in military matters to take charge.

“Yeah.” Eddie gave a nod. “He was only a major general at the time, though.”

“I heard Sir Zemault was helping him out until recently.”

“Hmm? Never met the guy. Maybe he was sent to replace me.”

“I see. Well, ignoring Sir Zemault for the moment... Could you tell me a little more about Dorvale? I’ll need any information you have as reference for my plans and negotiations.”

Eddie shrugged. “He was pitted against a territory without any decent forts and was leading three times as many troops as his enemy. It was a war that should have lasted half a month, but it ended up stretching on for over half a year.”

“Then he’s hopeless,” Altina sighed, mirroring Eddie’s gesture.

“Not that I performed all that well myself...” Eddie admitted.

“Anyway, the man’s an unmotivated coward. He’ll order a retreat when anyone else would order a charge.”

“How pathetic!”

Judging by this evaluation, it was only natural that word of the lieutenant general had never reached Versailles; the people of the capital preferred valiant tales of victory—although they gossiped about crushing defeats just as often. The fact that no such information had reached the general public meant that Dorvale had

probably avoided any major casualties. It was reasonable to assume this was the case; he would have needed to avoid any considerable losses to have maintained such a drawn-out war.

“Is he truly a coward...?” Regis wondered aloud. An incompetent leader would have carelessly sent his troops to their deaths, but the Sixth Army consistently maintained a force of twenty thousand soldiers. In short, although the man had not secured any victories, he had not suffered any losses either. It was then that Regis suddenly remembered: “Of all the battle records from this year, the Sixth Army has the highest survival rate.”

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At a certain time of year, the south was met with a staggering amount of rainfall. It went beyond wetting the ground, to the point where even walking became a struggle. Rivers overflowed, and sometimes it could take an entire day to cross them.

To make matters worse, the Fourth Army was carrying a great deal of supplies at the Sixth Army’s request. The latter had lost their stockpile along with their base and were now looking after a great number of refugees. The fact that arrangements had not already been made to supply the fortress they were retreating to was a show of poor planning on the Sixth Army’s part, but perhaps that was to be expected—had they been competent strategists, they would not have been routed in the first place.

And so, the Fourth Army was laden with a great number of wagons on its journey to the Sixth Army’s new base of operations.

Two weeks later—

The stone walls of Aloe-Marroe came into view, rising beyond the distant plains. The civilian portion was around the same size as Grebeauvoir, making it rather large for a provincial city.

Thick clouds made their escape over the horizon. It wasn't even noon, yet the early-morning rain was already a distant memory, the only remaining evidence being a smattering of puddles that reflected the blue sky above. The region was warm, dry, and generally pleasant to live in, but it was like a sauna now that the weather had cleared. Regis could feel the sweat beading on his brow even as he sat still.

"I see it!" Altina called out from atop her horse. She was riding beside the carriage.

"The south sure is vast," Regis noted through the open carriage window. "That took us longer than a round trip from Volks to the capital."

"We need to give the soldiers some rest."

"Right."

"Do you think Aloe-Marroe is all right? Etruria hasn't taken it yet, have they?"

"We've been in contact. Reports say the enemy army hasn't moved from Sembione. Perhaps the rain put their shipments behind as well."

"You mean they won't attack?"

"Well... If they focus on holding their current position, the imperial army could go on the offensive. That would make things considerably easier for us."

"Easier? Is Sembione an easy city to capture?"

"No, but the Etruscan Army doesn't have any high-spec cannons. We could crumble their walls by firing from afar and then secure a quick victory."

"Aha ha."

“Our enemy should know this too, which is precisely why they’ll attack Aloe-Marroe as soon as they’re able.”

“Could they be taking another route?”

“Perhaps, but then their supply line would end up severed the moment we retake Sembione, and they would stand very little chance against us with a starving army.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“I wouldn’t say that... These are just the basics of what you learn at the military academy.”

Of course, the academy devoted more than twice as long to swordsmanship as it did to academics, but Regis decided not to bring that part up. In any case, if the Sixth and Eighth Armies were in good health, and the Fourth Army joined the fray as well, there was no way the Etruscan Army could focus its efforts anywhere else. It would need to attack Aloe-Marroe eventually.

The Fourth Army soon arrived at the gate outside the city. Its messengers had come and gone several times, and arrangements had been made for the soldiers to be allowed inside at once.

“Hmm...” Altina stared curiously at the walls. “They’re kinda brown.”

“Dirt in this region contains sandstone,” Regis explained. “Most stones excavated in this region have a light-brown tint from the—”

“Ah, a cat! It’s so white!”

“O-Oh. Yeah...”

“It’s sleeker than the cats at the capital.”

“It might be a different breed,” Regis suggested. “According to Professor Chico Domingo in his book *I Crossed the Sea in Search of Cats*, southern cats are closer to the original wildcat species. I believe he said that cats originally lived in hotter climates.”

“Interesting...” the princess muttered as they passed through the gate.

Every building in sight seemed to be fashioned from the same light-brown stone, giving the place a somewhat warmer impression compared to the central territories. Newer constructions were made in the Belgianian style with bay windows and triangular roofs, while the older ones had smaller windows and flat roofs, making them similar in appearance to storehouses. Aloe-Marroe was clearly a city built in changing times; not even a century had passed since the region joined the Empire.

The main road zigzagged with no thought given to convenience or aesthetics. It was hard to discern the intentions of whomever had planned the city, assuming any planning had even gone into its construction—it seemed more likely that people had just established themselves wherever they pleased.

There were townsfolk and soldiers at every street corner. Some of the townsfolk saluted when they saw the Fourth Army, while others immediately rushed into their homes to hide.

Altina grumbled to herself, a somber look on her face.

“What’s the matter?” Regis asked.

“It’s just as Eddie said—the troops here haven’t got any willpower.”

“Do you mean they aren’t trained properly?” Regis asked. His inability to use a weapon or ride a horse meant he was unable to gauge how skilled the soldiers were from appearances alone.

“I don’t think they’re weak. I don’t see many fresh recruits either. To me, they seem like skilled soldiers who’ve grown so accustomed to the battlefield that they’re starting to get lazy.”

“I see.”

“I mean, we’re being invaded. Shouldn’t they be a bit more high-strung?” It was still daytime, and yet some of the soldiers were even walking around shirtless, their faces beet red as they drunkenly bumbled around.

“This is about what you should expect from frontier units,” Regis replied, trying to pacify Altina before she became too displeased. “General Jerome kept the Beilschmidt border regiment in line, but they were very much the exception.”

“Doesn’t that mean the commander here is too soft?!”

“You could put it that way...”

As they approached a building at the center of town, they came across even more soldiers. These ones, however, were marching in disciplined formation.

“Oh, so they do have proper soldiers,” Altina remarked.

“The Eighth Army, perhaps?”

Altina seemed to evaluate them highly, but Regis was more uncertain. Perhaps it was because they were in the middle of the city, but the troops were armed with swords and shields instead of polearms. Tactics changed with the trends, and at present, spears twice as long as the average soldier was tall played the most important role on the battlefield.

Well, the Eighth Army’s commander is a western noble... Regis mused. Such people had a tendency to value tradition.

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Although the great hall of Aloe-Marroe’s fortress was humble in size, its walls were lavishly decorated with Belgarian cloth. Altina was brought to the highest point of the room, with Eric at her side and Regis following behind, where she was introduced to the commanders of the stationed armies and their staff.

Lieutenant General Bernard Jean de Dorvale, the commander of the Sixth Army, wore a modest smile. He was about forty years of age—his glimmering head was oddly reminiscent of a cue ball, and his stomach protruded despite his best efforts to hide it beneath his ornamented uniform.

“Thank you for making the long trek all the way here, *Généralissime* Argentina.”

Leading the Eighth Army was Lieutenant General Laurenbert Abel de Rockhoward, who looked to be around thirty-five. He was well-built, as was to be expected of a Belgarian military man, and offered the princess a strict salute.

“I am the commander of the Eighth Army, Lieutenant General Rockhoward, ma’am!”

“That the south front had to be pulled back so drastically weighs heavily on my mind,” Altina said, delivering a line she had prepared and rehearsed several times over. “Of course, so too does the fact that Emperor Latrielle has decided *more* reinforcements are in order.”

“Erk...”

Rockhoward gritted his teeth in face of the princess’s criticism, his shame at having been pushed back by the Etruscan Army clear on his face. Dorvale, in contrast—the man who surely bore the most responsibility for the present situation in the south—seemed entirely unfazed.

“As *généralissime*,” Altina continued, “I am taking full command of all the forces stationed here. If you take issue with this, speak up now.”

“The Eighth Army is ready to go!” Rockhoward declared sternly, sticking out his chest. “We await your orders, ma’am!”

Once again reacting in stark contrast to his fellow lieutenant general, Dorvale smiled so sweetly that it was almost uncanny. “It is an honor to be under the command of the renowned *généralissime*,” he said.

“Mm... As your superior officer, I must ask—why did you abandon Sembione without even putting up a decent fight?”

Rockhoward immediately began to sweat. He had turned so pale that he looked as though he might pass out at any moment. “Yes, that is... I-In order to protect imperial territory, the Eighth Army did its utmost t-to...” He floundered for a moment before ultimately conceding. “I merely followed Lieutenant General Dorvale’s command.”

Even when his name was spoken, Dorvale remained surprisingly calm. Regis had expected him to panic a little more when pressed to take responsibility.

Is it because he’s a powerful noble from the central regions...?

“My apologies,” Dorvale said, his smile never faltering. “We have frequent skirmishes, but our enemies are fanatical heretics who fight like beasts. I made the decision to prioritize the safety of the populace. We did not have enough soldiers to protect the vast expanse that is the south...”

It was an answer that remained well within Regis’s expectations—an assertion from the lieutenant general that he had done his very best. It was not that the enemy had arrived with some revolutionary new weapon or tactic that nobody had expected; the imperial army had quite simply avoided the fight.

“Very well,” Altina said, “I won’t pursue what you’ve done up until this point. However, you will not be fighting so half-heartedly under my command!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Rockhoward replied, firmly nodding his understanding. Dorvale, meanwhile, looked somewhat pained.

“Aah, my apologies,” he said. “Truth be told, the soldiers of the Sixth Army are completely exhausted after holding the front line for so long. If you could afford us some rest...”

“Oh, really?” Altina shot back, now staring daggers into the man. “It certainly didn’t look that way to me. Rather, are you sure they haven’t gone soft after resting too much?”

“Perish the thought!” Dorvale replied, shaking his head from side to side. “My house was among the poorest of the central nobles. Many of our soldiers are old hands; they can’t be ordered around in the same way the young’uns can.”

“Is this how a commander should—!”

“Princess,” Regis interjected, stopping the princess before she could raise her voice, “the soldiers’ exhaustion isn’t always visible. Let us consider the opinion of the experienced general.”

“Mm... If you say so, Regis.”

Both Dorvale and Rockhoward seemed surprised, only now realizing that the man before them was *the* Regis d’Aurick. They had heard the name, but they had never seen him in person. Perhaps they were taken aback by how unsoldierly he was.

Dorvale’s lips immediately curled into a sociable smile. “As expected of our national hero!” he exclaimed. “Oh, how understanding! I can barely contain my gratitude! I cannot wait to witness how the *généralissime’s* elites wage their wars!”

So, you’re going to watch as the Fourth Army fights for you...?

He was undoubtedly unmotivated.

“Indeed,” Regis replied in a level tone, taking the utmost care not to reveal any emotion. It was clear to see that Dorvale completely lacked motivation. “Naturally, the Fourth Army will do all it can when

Etruria attacks. In any case, both of your armies are now under the princess's control. Please refrain from acting on your own."

"Understood!"

The two men saluted at the tactician and the princess. Regis responded with a nod, while Altina returned the gesture.

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"What was up with that?! That lack of will to do anything?!" Altina screamed.

"This is worse than I thought..." Regis sighed.

Altina paced around the room that had been prepared for her in the fortress, looking as furious as a bear that had been roused from hibernation.

Eric was the only other person in the room, standing by the door with the High Britannian Snider that Regis had originally sent over. Clarisse, who usually tended to the princess, was busy preparing lunch, while Eddie and Abidal-Evra had their own units to look after; the soldiers were fatigued and irritable after the long march and required a bit of care.

"But what about Rockhoward?" Eric said. "He seemed to be quite up to the task."

"More than Dorvale, at least..." Altina replied.

"You think so?" Regis asked, not quite so sure. "Bear in mind that the Eighth Army was just as inactive when Etruria attacked. Rockhoward just followed his orders."

Altina nodded along to show her understanding. "So he's all talk?"

"I don't know. I'll need to ask someone who was there to witness the battles."

"We could speak with his staff officers."

“No... I don’t think they’d say anything that might tarnish their commander’s reputation.”

As the *généralissime*, Altina now had the power to dismiss both commanders; a careless statement from the staff officers could easily end up costing them their jobs.

Regis checked his watch. “We actually have someone in this unit who can provide some information. He should be here soon...”

There came a sudden knock, which Eric promptly answered. The hefty door was swung open to reveal a rather handsome, friendly-looking man with thick lips, dressed in the finery of a noble. He gave an elegant salute.

“Inspector Frank Ignatius de Duran, dispatched from the Ministry of Military Affairs. The fact that I may meet the exalted *généralissime* is a greater honor than I deserve.”

“Inspector?” Altina repeated.

“Now, now,” Regis intervened. “It’s not like every inspector acts entirely out of self-interest.”

Inspector Becker, who had once arrived to audit the Beilschmidt border regiment, was nothing short of a terrible man. He was so terrible, in fact, that he had made Altina distrustful of the entire occupation.

Frank shrugged. “I understand. The moment I introduce myself as an inspector, I’m treated as though I’m demanding a bribe. But I make enough to support my family, and that’s already enough for me. My wife is like a goddess and my daughter like an angel; their smiles are all the sustenance I need,” he said. The sudden boast took Altina by surprise; the man certainly was peculiar.

“Umm...” Regis scratched his cheek. “Inspector Duran was recommended to me by Ms. Fanrine. She said that I should speak with him when we met up with the Eighth Army.”

Fanrine worked as an official at the Ministry, so it was safe to assume this man was trustworthy. He was invited inside—leaving him standing in the doorway certainly wasn’t an option—and they all gathered around the table in the room. Altina took the seat farthest from the door, Regis took the seat to her left, and Eric stood behind her to her right. As soon as Frank was seated across from them, the conversation resumed.

“I am not a soldier, so I cannot say whether this will prove at all useful, but...I have been with the Eighth Army since they were first dispatched south,” Frank said.

Regis nodded. “There is much I wish to know, but to begin with—how do Dorvale and Rockhoward command their troops? And please, speak in as much detail as you can.”

“It was wrong of me to assume all inspectors are evil,” Altina abruptly said, sounding awkward. “Sorry...”

“Oh, no,” Frank replied. “As much as I want you to trust me, I don’t personally trust inspectors either. They’re like rats who have fashioned a nest in the ship that is the Ministry of Military Affairs—idiots who keep chewing at the wood until they’ve gnawed a hole through the hull. Well, the Ministry has finally paid its dues and is no more. Ah, I suppose that makes me unemployed, officially speaking. And to think I introduced myself so grandiosely...”

Despite his words, Frank seemed deeply unconcerned about finding a new job. Perhaps a shrewd man like him already had an offer lined up.

“Normally, one decides where all the members will be transferred before dismantling the organization...” Regis murmured, digressing a

little. “The fact that everyone was dismissed at once really shows how much Emperor Latrielle hated the Ministry. They must have given him quite a hard time when he was marshal general.”

Frank responded only with a chuckle. It was easy to guess that he was trying to avoid making a comment on the new emperor.

“Getting back on track...” Regis said. “Please tell me about the Eighth Army’s command.”

“How did we even get into this situation?” Altina added.

“Lieutenant General Rockhoward...” Frank began. “To put it lightly, he issues orders that I don’t really understand.”

“Huh...?”

“He’s from an influential western house, so one would assume he is well studied on tactical matters...but he seems to forget one thing the moment something else comes to mind.”

“F-For instance...?”

“I could bring up numerous examples. The largest one would be when they first joined with the Sixth Army to defend Sembione...”

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One month prior—

Sembione was a city spread over the top of a hill and surrounded by low walls. It had a well and a reservoir, and with plenty of reserves, it received passing marks as a military stronghold.

The Sixth Army had roughly twenty thousand soldiers stationed in Sembione. It was unknown why Dorvale had gotten them to withdraw so far into Belgarian territory. In the first place, the Sixth Army’s base was supposed to have been a much sturdier fortress even farther south. This fortress had fallen much too easily, however, forcing them to retreat beyond the Crena River. It was a

grave oversight, and it would not have been strange for someone to press the lieutenant general to accept the blame for the matter.

In any case, there were fifty thousand civilians and twenty thousand soldiers in Sembione when the Eighth Army marched in.

“We have come at the order of Marshal General Latrielle,” Rockhoward said. “The Etruscan Army is nothing before the joint might of the Sixth and Eighth Armies!”

Dorvale gazed over the new army and asked, “How are your supplies?”

“We have enough to fight for one month.”

“Hmm...”

It sounded as though preparations were not an issue, but then Dorvale had immediately ordered the civilians to evacuate. Was it a decision made based on a bad premonition? Perhaps he wanted to reduce the number of mouths to feed if they were put under siege.

A week later, the Etruscan Army arrived at Sembione—twenty thousand troops against the imperial army’s forty thousand. To bring a swift end to the conflict, Rockhoward had proposed that they head out and strike their foe. Dorvale had agreed to this, and—

“Why?!” Regis exclaimed, interrupting the story.

“So I’m not the only one who thought it strange,” Frank said.

“I mean... You were stationed in a splendid, fortified city. The natural first course of action would have been to let Etruria attack. Only after lowering their numbers and exhausting their men should you have opened the gates to challenge them on the plains.”

Regis had not said anything revolutionary—this much was common sense, the basic fundamentals that were hopefully detailed in even the most bare-bones of military textbooks.

Frank nodded. “Well, as to why Rockhoward suddenly proposed this strategy...I just so happened to overhear his conversation with his staff officers.”

The lieutenant general sat in a leather chair at the back of the room, with his officers joining him around the long table. This was the Eighth Army’s war council.

“The Etruscan Army has appeared!” one of the men reported.

“Roughly twenty thousand soldiers!”

Rockhoward harrumphed. “The Sixth Army has been launching one retreat after another, so I was wondering what massive legion was on its heels. Is that it...?”

“There is no need to fear. Belgaria’s victory is unwavering!”

“But we could never take action ourselves. After all, negligence is forbidden!” Rockhoward replied. He was reprimanding the man, but his moderate tone made it clear that he was joking—he even went as far as to let slip a hearty chuckle. His staff officers laughed along with him. The battle had yet to even begin, but Rockhoward was acting like he had already won.

“Imagine how grateful Dorvale is going to be,” another of the officers said. “The Eighth Army will bring him victory. I’m sure all those nobles and the Ministry will shower you with praise!”

Rockhoward chuckled again at the thought. “Oh, I have no interest in praise nor gratitude... But if they want to celebrate my achievement, who am I to refuse?!”

Rockhoward was a western noble in First Prince Auguste’s faction. Ever since the celebrations in April, when Auguste had relinquished his claim to the throne, the western nobles had become the laughingstock of high society and were treated as beneath even the newcomers from the south. The lieutenant general craved a chance

to restore his reputation, and not a single one of the officers dared rain on his parade. Their vigorous words bounced around the room.

“We outnumber our foe two to one. If we challenge them on the open plains, there’s no reason for us to lose.”

“Yes, exactly! They’re nothing but farmers who traded their spades for spears. Let’s show them how real war is fought!”

“This is a fine chance to show off the traditional swordsmanship of the west!”

The staff officers spoke as though they were drunk, but no alcohol had been consumed. They were inebriated by their own arrogance.

“All right,” Rockhoward said, sounding cheerful, “we go out to meet them! If we can win on the plains, there’s no need to hold the fortress!”

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“Gah. My head...” It had been a while since Regis had suffered a migraine. He put his head in his hands and groaned, earning himself a look of sympathy from Frank.

“Unfortunately, I am not even exaggerating,” the inspector said. “They galloped out as jubilantly as if they were going foxhunting.”

“He didn’t seem like the sort to be so careless...”

“As a noble myself, it pains me to say this, but...nobles are like boastful lions among friends and loyal dogs the moment they meet someone above them.”

“Good grief...” Regis sighed. “But why didn’t Dorvale refuse him? Such an idiotic plan...”

“Perhaps he was running low on rations. Not that I have any evidence to prove this.”

“I thought the Sixth Army had plenty of reserves.”

“Truth be told, they abandoned most of their rations as they fled from fortress to fortress. And yet, they kept taking more refugees with them. I think it’s very praiseworthy to protect the people of the nation, but...”

If you’re going to protect them, you need to secure enough food for them too, the inspector seemed to want to say. Even Altina was holding her head now.

“What the hell is that bald badger doing?!”

“Princess, please don’t be so personal with your criticisms,” Regis said. “Most of the soldiers and civilians made it out fine, so I don’t think it was a terrible decision. But, well...it surprises me that they’re so dependent on the rations of reinforcements.” After receiving word of the dire situation the imperial army was in, the Fourth Army had opted to bring several times more supplies than they otherwise would have.

Frank shrugged his shoulders. “Each fortress—Sembione included—should have had plenty of reserves...” he noted.

“And now they’re all in Etruria’s war chest...”

“Presumably.”

This time, even Eric sighed.

“So, the Etruscan soldiers aren’t attacking because they’re too full to move?” Altina muttered.

Regis offered a weak chuckle. “Well, I imagine they’re waiting for the rainy season to end. It’s September now, so it shouldn’t be long.”

“I guess so...” Altina sighed. It seemed as though the conversation had reached its natural conclusion, but then she looked up in realization. “Wait a second!” She stuck up four fingers on her right hand and two on her left. “Even if leaving the fortress was a terrible idea, the Belgarian Army was forty thousand strong! Meanwhile, the

Etruscan Army only had twenty thousand soldiers! What reason was there to order a retreat?!”

“While the two armies were staring each other down...Sembione caught fire,” Frank explained.

“*What?!*”

“An accident of some kind was apparently to blame, but this was only discovered later. At the time, Lieutenant General Dorvale, who had been commanding the forces outside the town, came to the conclusion that the enemy had outmaneuvered them and had taken the city from behind. He ordered a full retreat.”

Stunned into silence, Altina threw herself down onto the table.

Regis groaned. “This sounds very similar to what happened in Cron Merrily’s book, *Heroes’ Elegy*. It was a flashy epic that was very well received, but it was criticized for using fire to confuse the enemy during the climax.”

“They had forty thousand men, and it was completely different from the battle with High Britannia!” Altina complained. “How can so many people mistake a fire for an enemy attack?! You’ve gotta be messing with me!”

“If they left only a few people to hold the fort, I can see how they might have mistaken the smoke for something more worrying...”

“Really?!”

“They should have sent a messenger to confirm the situation, though. It wouldn’t have been too late for them to order a retreat *after* they’d confirmed that the fort had fallen,” Regis said. Of course, in the case that the Etruscan Army had taken Sembione, the imperial army would have needed to adjust their formation to prevent themselves from being attacked from both sides.

Altina continued to bemoan the foolish decisions that had been made; the amount of valuable resources the imperial army had needed to sacrifice over a single accidental fire was no laughing matter. Had the blunder resulted from nervousness on the battlefield? Just how much blood would be spilled to reclaim what was lost?

There was a bit of rain that evening, but the next morning was once again clear. The bad weather was but a distant memory.

Chapter 2: Life on the Battlefield

Regis struggled against the large iron door, so heavy that its hinges wailed as it opened. At that moment, he wished it were made of wood, much like the standard doors used in town...but that was out of the question for a military structure. After eventually making his way outside, he had to press his shoulder against the door to force it shut again.

“Phew...”

He had thought that the approach of evening might have offered some respite from the heat, but the sun continued to beat down. He used his sleeve to wipe the sweat beading on his brow. Just as he was about to head for the back gate of the fortress, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Where are you going?”

“Huh?!”

“Regis...?”

All of a sudden, Regis found that Altina was standing beside him, regarding him with wide eyes. It seemed the cat was already out of the bag. “I thought I would go into town to collect some information...” he said.

“Leave that to the soldiers.”

“Oh, no. There are some things I simply can’t entrust to others.”

“We may be in Belgian territory, but this land belonged to the enemy only a hundred years ago. It’s too dangerous to walk around alone—aren’t you the one who said that?”

“That’s, well... That’s because you’re the *généralissime*.”

“You’re quite the VIP too, you know!”

“Please... I stand out as much as a grain of sand on a long beach.”

“Didn’t you *also* say something about the responsibility that comes with your position?!” Altina went on, seizing Regis by the sleeve of his uniform and swinging him to and fro.

“Waah!” Regis cried. “I just couldn’t help myself, okay?!”

“Hm? Did you have another reason for sneaking out?”

“Do you remember how we entered through the gate at noon, then headed straight for the fortress at the center of town...?”

“Yeah.”

“Along the way, I... I saw a bookstore, so...” Regis muttered, his voice barely audible.

“Hmm?” Altina wore a smile, but she was exuding a tremendous amount of wrath.

“Wait, wait, wait. Please, calm down and hear me out.”

“I’m calm. I’m listening. But there’s no guarantee that won’t change once I’ve heard what you have to say.”

“We’re talking about a bookstore two hundred lieue from the capital—I can hardly contain my curiosity as I ponder what might be kept there! It’s hardly been fifty years since movable type entered the mainstream, and people used to write books by hand before then. They might even have books from Etruria or Hispania! Sure, they might go for the same price as a house, but there’s value to be found simply in confirming they exist. I’m not expecting anything grand enough to be considered a work of fine art, of course; this *is* only a corner bookstore. Plus, if they ship books from the capital, it’ll only be a curated selection. Still, what could the best seller be in these parts? Whose books do they stock? Aren’t you curious?!”

“Not really.”

“Aww...” Regis deflated in an instant.

After heaving a deep sigh, Altina scratched her head, making a complete mess of the red hair Clarisse had so carefully tidied up for her meeting with the lieutenant generals. “Ah, fine,” she conceded. “Have it your way. But I’m coming too!”

“Eh?! That’s not—”

“This is my first time in a southern town too. We stopped by a few places along the way, but I never got a proper look.”

“Perhaps, but... It’s dangerous for the *généralissime* to travel unguarded...”

“Come on! You want to see the bookstore, don’t you?”

“Wh-Wha—?!”

The next thing Regis knew, Altina had wrapped her arm around his. He could feel a soft sensation pressing against his elbow—it seemed that she had grown in more than just character.

“Don’t worry, Regis! We won’t have anything to worry about so long as we return before sundown!”

And so, Regis was practically dragged out of the back gate. There were sentries, of course, but Altina’s red hair and crimson eyes made her stand out as royalty. Not a single person had the backbone to stop her.

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“W-W... Wow!” Regis cried out, his eyes darting around the store.

Altina was standing right behind him, looking rather bored. “What? Find anything interesting?” she asked.



“This... This is incredible!”

“It looks like a normal bookstore to me.”

The building itself was built in a style that wouldn't be found around the capital, but there wasn't much else that immediately caught the eye; the floors and ceilings were made of standard wooden boards, and the wooden bookshelves weren't shaped strangely in any way. The fact that the clerk wore shorts was somewhat peculiar for a store that dealt in luxury items, but that was about it.

In truth, Regis and Altina were the real curiosities; a soldier who looked nothing like one and a girl whose hair color was incredibly rare in Belgaria had quickly become the focus of the other customers. Regis, however, was focused entirely on the books.

“This right here! It was published over twenty years ago!” he exclaimed. “It's a rare edition all the collectors are looking for!”

“So it's...an old book.”

“Yeah, that's right! It's an old book!”

Twenty years prior, books had gone for a much higher price. Many who wished to buy them would end up in tears, spending many long and rough years saving up enough capital to purchase the one they so longed for. There was no fiercer collector than one who learned to endure the struggle.

Regis stared at the books lining the shelves. They were not all crammed together; rather, they were displayed at an angle so that the covers were also visible. Each individual volume was an expensive luxury, and it was forbidden for customers to touch them without the clerk's permission.

“As expected, the import fees make it more expensive than it was at first publication...” Regis mumbled. “But given that you can’t find it anywhere around the capital, this price is a steal.”

“Wait a second. Regis! That’s a whole month of your salary! Don’t be so ridiculous!”

“Oh, no. Now that I’m a first-grade, I’m earning a little more.”

On that note, the ministry that handled the soldiers’ wages no longer existed. Jurisdiction over such matters was now in the hands of the First Army...and the *généralissime*.

“Altina...” Regis began in a low voice. “You *will* pay me a proper salary, won’t you?”

“Don’t ask me. I was hoping you’d deal with all that.”

“Urk.”

Regis had entrusted the management of wages, along with all the council’s other administrative work, to Count Gauchen, but now he was having his doubts.

The First Army had taken possession of the Ministry’s buildings and much of its personnel—it was presumably the first national army with the power to decide its own budget. However, even now that Latrielle had access to so many authorities and such a great sum of money, his relationship with Altina remained strained, and the Fourth Army had no place in the imperial palace. Count Gauchen had ended up buying the estate of a fallen noble to serve as the headquarters of the *généralissime*’s council.

At the very least, no matter the new emperor’s will, Regis had no need to worry about the soldiers’ basic needs. Those with experience in the Ministry were experts at moving around money to ensure none of the troops starved, and for that reason, the Fourth Army’s

finances were largely in the hands of the former officials Count Gauchen had summoned.

Of course, it was important to remember that the Ministry had previously employed over two thousand people, and that the portion incorporated into the *généralissime*'s council numbered only a hundred and fifty. This was a turbulent time of reorganization, so there was a chance that the reception of wages would end up being delayed.

Regis might have been able to open a tab had this been a bookstore in the capital, but he had no chance in the farthest reaches of the Empire. It was a shame; even he was somewhat reluctant to part with all the money he had saved from before the expedition.

"I really shouldn't spend all my money on this," he muttered. "What if I come across a book that I want even more?"

"That's your reasoning?!" Altina cried out.

"Don't get me wrong—regardless of whether I purchase this book, I'm making sure to keep half of my savings."

"Ah. So you *are* considering living expenses."

"Well, no. I placed a few preorders in the capital that I still need to pay for."

"How are you still alive?"

"Aha... No need to worry. As long as you're with the army, food, clothes, and shelter are all provided. I can live just fine."

"Eeh..." Altina returned a frown, although Regis did not think he had said anything strange. The store's selection consisted largely of volumes that were over a decade old, but that was what made it so fascinating to him.

"Aloe-Marroe... Such a nice place."

“Please don’t judge a whole town by its books...” Altina said, exasperated.

“Aha ha... Hee hee...”

As Regis stared eagerly at the shelves, without his realizing it, he started to leak an uncanny laugh.

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Even after a long while had passed, Regis and Altina were still in the bookstore. As there weren’t any other customers around, Altina decided to broach the question that was playing on her mind.

“Hey, Regis. Do you think we can beat Etruria?”

“Hmm? Are you having doubts?”

“I think we’ll prevail in the end, but...I’m not sure how harsh the battle is going to be.”

“Etruria can dispatch thirty thousand troops at most.”

As a nation, Etruria was larger than Varden and Langobarti of the Germanian Federation, but it was only half as capable as High Britannia. It was probably best compared to Estaburg on the eastern front.

“Belgaria has stationed close to fifty thousand troops in the south,” Regis continued. “Forget defense and recovery—we could successfully invade and conquer Etruria.”

“So we’ll win.”

“Of course. But that isn’t the problem.”

“Really?”

Regis glanced around to make sure no other customers were in earshot. He could see the store clerk looking at them, but as long as he kept his voice down, it would probably be fine.

“The important part is how many men remain after the war,” Regis said. Soldiers were by no means an endless resource, but competent officers were even more valuable; losing too many in battle would render the unit unable to function.

“Naturally. I don’t want to lose any troops either.”

“After we’ve fought back Etruria’s invading force, I think Latrielle intends to invade them.”

“What?!”

“He proclaimed that he would conquer our neighbors within the next two years. For him to make good on that promise, he’ll need to have taken Etruria within the year.”

“But to invade them...!”

“You said it yourself—this town was part of another nation not even a hundred years ago,” Regis said. The name of that nation had already disappeared from the map.

Altina thought for a moment. “Do you think he’ll give that order to me?”

“That’s what the *Généralissime*’s Baton is for. And for that reason, I would like to avoid exhausting the Fourth Army in this battle.”

“I want to rid the world of war—and poverty and discrimination too, for that matter. I’m aiming for peace, yet you want me to march on foreign soil?”

“You don’t have to go personally. You could always leave that to whomever you deem more appropriate.”

“That wouldn’t change anything. I’d still be the one giving the orders. Regis, what do you think I should do?”

“You might have your objections, but Latrielle is the emperor, and the military is obligated to follow his orders. If you wish to oppose

him, we would need to stage a rebellion...but the only thing that would serve is your own stubbornness.”

“You can’t mean...” Altina trailed off. She was mature enough to control her emotions, and it wasn’t as though Regis wanted to do this either. “Are you really all right with this?”

“I intend to do whatever is necessary to achieve our ideal, even if that means having to leave an unpleasant mark on history. At the very least, I believe we should follow the new emperor’s policies for the time being.”

Altina hung her head. “Right. I knew this day would come, from the moment Latrielle took the throne...”

“Just make sure to keep your emotions in check. Don’t do anything reckless without consulting me first.”

“I’m not a child. Don’t worry.”

So she said, but Regis recalled the countless stomachaches he had endured as a result of the princess’s impulsive actions. Some of those memories were rather quite recent. He let out a long breath and decided to focus on the present.

“The south was originally meant to have been under the protection of the Sixth Army,” Regis said. “Something’s been bothering me a little, so let’s have them do some work for us.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. Right now, it’s only conjecture.”

All of a sudden, the door to the bookstore swung open, and an elderly gentleman entered with a young woman by his side. The store clerk reverently bowed his head and produced from beneath the counter several books that he would never expose to the general public. This old man must have been a local celebrity of sorts.

Regis struggled to hear what they were talking about; it seemed to be about a particular book order, but he could determine no more than that. His discussion with Altina was not one that could really be had at the fortress, what with the Sixth Army about, but he could not allow any civilians to overhear him either. For that reason, he finally decided to leave the bookstore.

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The courtyard was in quite the uproar when Regis and Altina returned to the fortress. It seemed the soldiers had gathered for something, and as the tactician wondered what might have happened, Eric rushed over with the speed of a cavalry charge.

“Princess! Mr. Regis! Where did you go?!”

Altina gave a wry chuckle. “Into town for a bit...”

“Without any guards?! Am I really that unreliable in your eyes?!”

“N-No, of course not. I just thought the whole thing would become a big deal if we brought guards along too. We wouldn’t be able to go where we wanted.”

“‘A big deal’?! It’s already a big deal! *You’re* a big deal! You can’t just go wherever you want on your own, Princess!”

As the scolding continued, Altina glanced over at Regis, her eyes pleading for help. He had been the one trying to sneak out in the first place, but now he was busy staring at the soldiers grouped in the courtyard. They seemed to be surrounding...

Mercenaries? And pretty strong ones, at that.

“Ah!” he suddenly exclaimed. “The Mercenary King!”

Regis recognized a face among them—Gilbert Schweinzeberg, the leader of Renard Pendu. He had with him some very sturdy-looking cohorts.

Upon noticing that Regis had arrived, Gilbert left the gathering of soldiers and walked over. "Long time no see, Tactician," he said.

"You really came..." Regis replied, his surprise clear in his voice.

"What choice did I have? You're holding my men and my sisters hostage."

"Huh? That wasn't my intention at all. I'm sure I wrote that they were just accompanying us."

"Yeah. And in mercenary terms, that means they're dead unless I comply."

"Well, I'm not a mercenary..."

Altina smiled. "You look well, Gilbert!"

"And you look like you've slimmed down a bit, Princess," Gilbert replied, returning a small and surprisingly warm grin. Regis found this quite curious.

"Did you two talk a lot while I was gone?" he asked.

"Hm?" Altina tilted her head. "Not really."

"I wouldn't say so," Gilbert agreed.

"We did cross blades a lot though, so I guess we built up some natural camaraderie!"

"I won't deny that."

So they did talk, only through their muscles... Regis thought. He then cradled his head. "Wait, you were crossing blades with a prisoner? How did that come about?"

Naturally, many had been opposed to the idea, but the Fourth Army did not have anyone capable of containing Altina's aspirations as a swordswoman. Eric sighed as he recalled the chaos at the time.

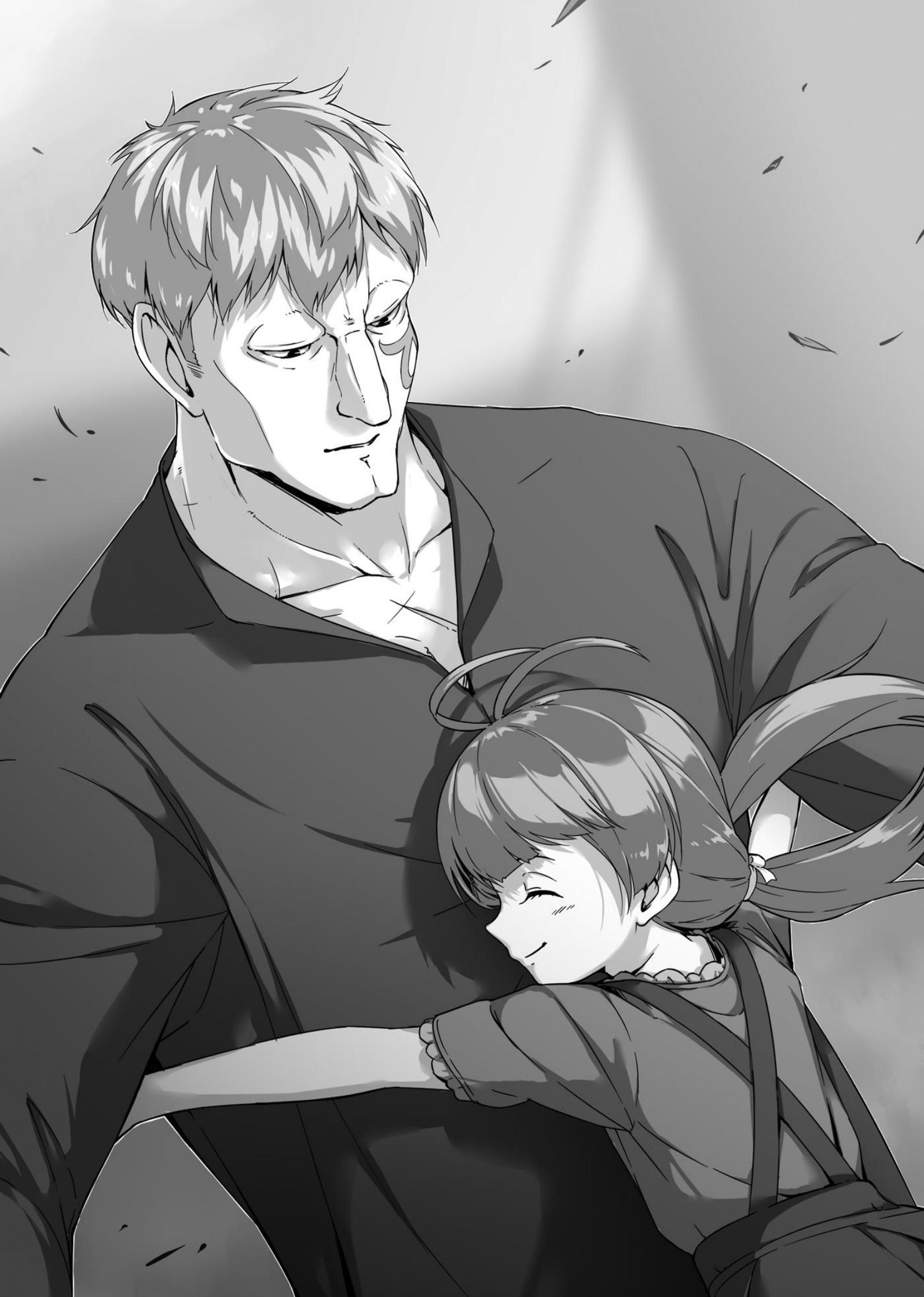
As their conversation continued, another group entered the courtyard.

“GIIIIIIL!”

The enthusiastic cry echoed through the courtyard—and perhaps even the entire fortress—as a young girl sprinted toward them at full pelt.

“Martina...” Gilbert muttered in response. His voice came out so gentle that it was like he had turned into someone else entirely.

There was a dull *thud* as Martina threw herself at the Mercenary King, gripping him in a tight embrace. “Gil! Gil!” she continued to shout.



Following her lead, the other members of Renard Pendu who had accompanied the Fourth Army raced over. “Captain! Captain!” many of them cried. Some even burst into tears.

Gilbert responded only with a pleased nod and an almost inaudible, “Good.”

The mercenaries who had been held in Fort Volks seemed just as overjoyed at the reunion. It was quite the moving scene, but Regis felt rather conflicted about the whole affair, considering that the Fourth Army was responsible for separating them in the first place. It was as he stewed over this moral conundrum that his eyes shifted to Jessica, who was watching from the shadows. He decided to go over to her.

“Are you not going to talk to him?” Regis asked.

“I can do that later,” Jessica replied impassively. “We are in no condition to calmly discuss our future policy.”

“I was sure you’d be most eager to see him.”

“Indeed. It feels as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Such a struggle it was, doing his job for him, and with so many bothersome people around. I had no time to read.”

“I understand completely.”

“You have my gratitude, Sir Aurick. You released my brother and reunited us, as you said you would.”

“I’m just relieved I could honor my promise.”

“*Half* of your promise.”

“Yes, I haven’t forgotten. You need financial support. I have to ask, though—why not take a contract with the Fourth Army? We have the *généralissime*’s council at our disposal now. The army is still

being reorganized, but I think we can prepare a sum worthy of such a widely regarded mercenary brigade.”

“You are about to face Etruria, and the odds are greatly in your favor. Do you really need us? Or is this you plotting something again?”

“I may not need you for *this* battle, but as for the next one...”

“So that is your intention.”

“I must warn you, though—for mercenaries used to the cold Germanian weather, it may be a little harsh.”

Jessica looked to the sky, as she always did when thinking hard about something. “I shall consider it,” she said. “My brother will make the final call.”

“That works for me.”

“That face... You look as though you already know our answer.”

“I simply believe that I’ve offered acceptable terms. I can’t say how things stand on an emotional level.”

“And what if we instead take up work with Etruria or Hispania? What will you do then?”

“Hm. That would be one more thing to worry about. But I would very much recommend against doing that.”

“Why?”

“Belgaria’s neighbors haven’t yet realized that the lion they’re teasing has finally awoken. If they’re that slow on the uptake, they don’t have much longer ahead of them.”

Jessica patted down the hem of her clothes that had become ruffled in the wind. “Is the new emperor that formidable?”

“He is.”

“He was nothing special in the war against High Britannia.”

It was an understandable conclusion to make. During the war, Renard Pendu had managed to take the then second prince by surprise and inflict upon him wounds great enough to compromise his eyesight. Latrielle had also been a step behind in the defense of Fort Boneire.

Even so, Regis shook his head. “Emperor Latrielle is a capable commander, but his talents are more in line with that of a statesman. He has a personality that brings him out onto the front lines, but his injuries will force him to remain in the palace for a while. And I believe Belgaria will be all the stronger as a result.”

“Your words always lack any credible evidence.”

“In half a year’s time, the Empire will have access to enough rifles to arm every foot soldier in the Fourth Army. We may be reliant on paper casings, but we have more than enough gunpowder. Neither Etruria nor Hispania has the same industrial capacity.”

Jessica’s expression remained calm, but she offered no response. It seemed that she had no rebuttal to give.

As their conversation lulled, Eric ran over again. This time, rather than serving as a guard officer, it seemed he was running an errand.

“Mr. Regis! Your brother-in-law is here!”

“Huh?”

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The sky was a deep red.

Two concentric rings had formed in the courtyard. Soldiers of the Sixth Army made up the outer circle, watching warily from a distance, while the inner circle was composed of a mishmash of mercenaries. Gilbert was standing at the very center, now with Martina clinging to his back, while Altina and Regis stood opposite

him. Eric was standing at their side—and, surprisingly enough, so was Regis’s brother-in-law, Enzo.

Enzo gave a hearty chuckle. “Yo, Regis! So you really are alive!”

“Yes. Somehow or other, as luck would have it,” Regis replied. “I didn’t expect you to come south.”

“Well, this and that happened.”

“Are you still repairing the soldiers’ weapons?”

“In my free time. Not that I was planning to. I thought I’d go home in time for Prince Latrielle’s coronation.”

“There were a lot of people gathered for the ceremony. It would have been the perfect opportunity to do business.”

“But then word came in about you, my dear boy. Rumor had it you’d up and died.”

“Wait, so...your being here is my fault?”

Enzo scratched his head. “Well, the princess was so outraged that she immediately headed for the capital. She wouldn’t wait for the foot soldiers, so they had to trail along behind. Didn’t even prepare the rations they needed. Seemed much too risky for me to go along with her.”

“I suppose so.”

“Worst-case scenario, we could have had a civil war on our hands.”

“Yeah...”

“I was gonna head straight home. On my own, even. Figured there was no way I could leave the wife and kids alone in those circumstances. That was, until my apprentice and the soldiers stopped me.”

“A wise decision on their part. If civil war had broken out, they’d have considered you among the traitors either way. If you’d returned to Rouenne, you’d have been arrested before you could even enter the city.”

“Yeah. Wasn’t much else I could do, so I wrote a letter to the wife telling her to go to my side of the family if she needed anything.”

“That makes sense.”

“But then, before I even had the chance to send it, a message came in. Said you were actually alive!”

“Oh, right... I suppose military express messages do travel quite fast.”

“It was a surprise, to be sure. But a welcome one,” Enzo said. He then breathed a demonstrative sigh of relief.

Regis lowered his head. “Sorry for all the trouble.”

“Hah. No worries. So yeah, there I was, thinking that was a load off my mind. Then, not even a day later, I hear that you’re headed south! I don’t even know what’s going on anymore.”

“It was a surprise for me too. I’m beginning to suspect that Emperor Latrielle just wanted us out of his sight.”

Enzo produced a carefully folded letter from his pocket. “I was wondering what to do when a letter came from the wife.”

“What?” Regis asked. He skimmed through the paper he was shown. Vanessa had written a great amount and on a wide variety of matters, but the overlying message was clear: do what you think is right.

“For me, family comes first,” Enzo said as he carefully tucked the letter away again.

“Is that so?” Regis replied. “That’s a good mindset, there are no two ways about it, but then what brings you here?” Enzo’s workshop was in Rouenne, as were his family and other apprentices.

“There might not have been any scrapping this time, but it’s going to happen eventually, right?”

“I wouldn’t say that...” Regis muttered. The soldiers of the Sixth Army were watching at a distance. It was unclear whether they could hear the conversation, but he couldn’t quite admit to his rebellious intentions with so many present. Enzo picked up on this a beat later and tactfully rephrased.

“I thought you might need my help,” he said.

Regis nodded. “I couldn’t ask for more.”

“Glad to hear it. And I really mean that. Took me half a month to get here, so I don’t know what I’d have done if you’d said you don’t need me!”

“In truth, I should be begging for your help. The only reason I haven’t been is because, as you said, your family should come first.”

“Oh, right, about that! That’s why I came south! You’re my brother-in-law, and I accepted the job to fix the princess’s sword, right? I’ve worked in Volks too, so there was no way I could return to Rouenne and act as though everything was business as usual. That’s what I was told, at least.”

“By whom?” Regis asked. He had just been thinking that such astute forethought was unusual for his otherwise straightforward brother-in-law.

“My apprentice Lionel. I don’t really get him, but he’s a smart one. I’m sure he was onto something.”

“Another wise decision...”

“You think so too? I’ve been thinking about calling my family and apprentices down south, for their safety. Though only after you’ve driven off all these invaders, Regis.”

“Remember, the princess is the commander here. I intend to do my best as well, though.”

Upon hearing this, Enzo bowed to Altina. “I think I can be of some use,” he said. “Please, use me as you see fit.”

“That’s reassuring!” the princess replied with a broad smile. “Glad to have you aboard!”

“That aside, Enzo...” Regis said in a low voice. “You came here with Renard Pendu, didn’t you? Weren’t you scared of what might happen?”

Enzo had been traveling with the very same mercenaries who had been held prisoner in the fort and forced into doing labor. Now that they were free, would they not consider seeking vengeance against the brother-in-law of the tactician whose unit had captured them?

“Gah hah hah!” Enzo laughed. “Course not! Gilbert’s a good guy. We’re pals, even!”

“‘Pals’?!” Regis exclaimed. He looked with wide eyes at the Mercenary King, who made no effort to deny this fact.

Just what happened while I was gone?!

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day—

Bang!

The roar of a gunshot pierced the air and a single hole opened up in the set of armor leaned against the wall, right where the heart would have been had a human been wearing it. Eric swiftly loaded a new bullet, took stance again, and—

Bang!

This time, he blew open a hole in the brow of the helmet.

Those watching were astir. Five shots had been fired thus far, four of which had struck their mark. Eric was undoubtedly a skilled sharpshooter, and considering that not even two months had passed since Regis had given him a rifle, it was clear that he was being very diligent with his training.

It was just before noon, in the courtyard of Aloe-Marroe's fortress. Eric was putting on a demonstration for the officers of the Sixth and Eighth Armies, as well as the officers of the Fourth Army who had not been present for the battles against High Britannia.

Regis picked up one of the new guns. "This is one of the rifles the High Britannian soldiers used when they marched upon Belgaria," he explained.

"I didn't think it could be reloaded so fast!" Dorvale piped up. Judging by the surprised expressions around him, it seemed that he was speaking for everyone.

"Indeed," Regis replied. "With practice, it can be loaded five times faster than the muskets we've been using thus far. In other words, a soldier equipped with one of these can provide as much firepower as five of our current gunmen."

"Astounding."

"They're also incredibly accurate. Our sharpshooter here, Eric Mickaël de Blanchard, is skilled—make no mistake about it—but hitting one's mark with such frequency would be nothing more than a game of chance without a gun that shoots straight."

"He's a knight, isn't he?" Dorvale asked. "Doesn't he have the advantage of having been trained to use firearms from a young age?"

“Three months of training is all it would take for even the most inexperienced soldier to hit more than half of their shots.”

“Incredible.”

During their march southward, Regis had practiced firing around a hundred shots. Even then, he had shown absolutely no sign of improving. “It’s not for you,” the others had told him. “This is a waste of bullets,” they had said. “The paperwork is piling up,” they had warned.

In other words, Regis’s claim that *anyone* could become at least somewhat proficient with a rifle was entirely untrue. Still, he knew that explaining this would only complicate matters, plus he considered himself something of an outlier, so he had decided that such a minor detail was best omitted.

“These are confiscated High Britannian models, but you will be loaned Belgian models in the near future,” Regis continued. “Rifleman units will soon be crucial on the battlefield, so please decide on your most capable soldiers in preparation for when this time comes.”

Dorvale groaned, while the other officers made similarly bitter faces. They were all skilled knights who excelled at close-quarters combat, so they were understandably less than pleased to hear that swords and spears were soon to be replaced.

Even so, the world was changing. Whether the Sixth and Eighth Armies would end up being added to the *généralissime*’s council was still up for discussion, but...it was very likely. Allowing them to continue as they currently were would only cause issues.

One of the officers raised a hand—a sinewy man who introduced himself as a knight of the Eighth Army and stood about a head taller than those around him. “Tactician, might I try firing one of these rifles?!” he asked.

“Go ahead,” Regis replied. They were relying on the supplies they had seized from High Britannia, so guns and ammunition were limited, but not so much that some practice was forbidden. He turned to Eric. “Can you teach this man?”

“Of course!” the young knight replied with a triumphant step forward. “Leave everything to me!”

Their hefty volunteer looked as though he would have been a force to be reckoned with had he been wielding a spear. He got into position, and the rifle seemed minuscule in his hands.

Eric enthusiastically corrected the man’s posture; it seemed that he had been working not only on his marksmanship, but on his teaching skills as well. It wasn’t long before his new student had a half-decent stance.

The knight closed one eye and took aim. “Hmm... This feels pretty similar to using one of the old models,” he said.

“The actual firing part is identical,” Eric said. “The sights and the loading mechanism are where things start to differ.”

“Got it.” The man readied himself and then pulled the trigger to a resounding *bang*. A beat later, another hole had been opened in the armor they were using for target practice. He raised a triumphant fist into the air. “Did you see that?!”

“Of course you’d hit something that close!” one of the other knights cried, dismissing the achievement outright. “Back up a little, why don’t you?! I could do that from another ten paces back!”

“Oh yeah? Prove it, then!”

It was then that the western nobles began to show their true colors; officers of the Eighth Army hopped aboard the idea one after another. Those of the Sixth Army, meanwhile, gradually began to disperse. It seemed that they were largely disinterested.

Dorvale was among those who decided to leave. “We’ll take volunteers once the guns arrive from the capital,” he said. “You said these new guns are going to be loaned to us—we won’t be expected to pay rental fees, will we?” Perhaps because Altina wasn’t there, he was taking a more condescending tone than when they had first met.

“Presumably not,” Regis replied.

“Ah, excellent. It’s already costing us a fortune to maintain our spears.”

Again, his focus is on expenses...

Dorvale acted like any other noble from the central regions, but his status by no means guaranteed his wealth. Perhaps he had good reason to be so concerned with his finances.

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Once the rifle demonstration was over, Regis headed for the officers’ dining hall with Eric in tow. “Thank you,” he said. “I think you made a fine impression.”

“I’m just glad I could be of some use,” Eric replied with a smile. He had looked ever so anxious from the moment Regis proposed the idea, so it was relieving to see him finally at ease again.

“I think ‘some’ is an understatement... Had I tried doing the demonstration myself, people might have come to assume the new guns are no better than toys.”

“Ah, ha ha...” Eric awkwardly looked away. “If you just practice a bit more, I’m sure—”

“Please. I think we’ve both seen enough to conclude that gunslinging is just another talent I’ll never possess. The bruise on my shoulder only recently faded.”

“Well, bruises are quite common... If you’re not used to the recoil, a single shot is sometimes all it takes.”

“Do you still get them?”

“No, not really. I’ve learned how to better divert the impact.”

“I see, I see...”

Eric lowered his head. “Thank you, Mr. Regis. On that tragic day, when I realized that I could no longer muster any strength in my left arm, I thought it was over for me. I really am grateful that I can continue to serve, as a guard and as a sharpshooter.”

“Yes, well...even with your impairment, I’m sure that you’re far stronger than me.”

“You’re a unique case. You may not be able to lift anything heavier than a pen, but you’re a match for a hundred thousand men.”

This excessive praise made the tactician quite embarrassed. *Well, Eric has always been one for poetic language, he recalled. Maybe a little hyperbole is to be expected.*

“I’ll do my best to meet your expectations,” Regis replied.

“And I yours. Please do continue to guide me...Mr. Regis.”

“R-Right...” Regis stammered in response.

“What...is *this*?”

Upon his arrival at the dining hall, Regis had to doubt his own eyes. He was rooted to the spot, quivering at the sight before him.

“Hmm?” came the familiar voice of the princess. “Oh, Regis. Looks like you’re working hard. You too, Eric.” She waved, having arrived before them.

“Who *are* you?” Regis asked, his lip trembling.

“Huh? Regis, what are you on about?!”

“This is impossible... The real Altina would never even *touch* a book!”

“How rude!” Altina exclaimed. “Even I read from time to time!”

Eric let out a dry chuckle. “Believe it or not, the princess has actually been reading lately. She started while you were away, saying that she wanted to show you how much she’s grown once you returned.”

“Th-That wasn’t the *only* reason,” Altina interjected, her cheeks flushed. “I used to read before, it’s just—”

Regis smiled. “How positively wonderful.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Of course. Reading is a wonderful pastime, no matter the book.”

“Aha ha...”

“You’ve gotten me in the mood to read as well, so...I’ll be off now.”

“Hey! Hold on! Didn’t you come here to eat?!” Altina cried out as Regis went to leave. Eric moved to block his escape.

Regis sighed with gritted teeth. “To be stuck watching someone else fulfill the desires of one’s own heart... This is the very definition of suffering.”

“You won’t have to wait long for food. Just keep your pants on.”

“All that sustains me are my books.”

“That’s enough out of you. I can’t even tell if you’re joking anymore.”

It *was* a joke, all things considered, but Regis was still very serious about his reading. Being absorbed in a book was easily enough for him to forget about hunger or any other such inconveniences.

As their squabble continued, maids began to arrive carrying large trays. Regis could see that Clarisse was among them. It was time for the other officers of the Fourth Army to enter the dining hall as well.

Today's menu consisted of duck, ham, and venison with tomatoes and potatoes on the side. The officers dived into their meals with great gusto, while Regis brought a modestly sized piece of duck to his mouth. The fragrant citrus sauce was a magnificent detail.

"We brought quite a lot of provisions," Regis said, "so we shouldn't have to worry about supply for the time being. If we don't recover our territory soon, however, we'll have a hard time dealing with the civilians."

"I thought that was the plan already. Did something happen?"

"Everyone else is unsure when we'll reclaim the farms south of Aloe-Marroe, and the cost of wheat and vegetables has risen astronomically as a result. It's having an impact all across the Empire."

"Right... You did mention the southern farmland being important."

"If we saw any major delays here, my plan was to procure supplies on site. But that's not an option anymore. I didn't expect the market value to rise this much."

Altina sighed. "If only Dorvale took some rations with him when he fled..."

"If only..."

"All right!" Altina suddenly exclaimed, rising to her feet. "Let's do this! We'll push back Etruria in no time and ensure the people can have their bread in peace!" It was a very abrupt call to arms, but the officers roared in response nonetheless.

"Long live the *généralissime*!" one cried. "Long live the Empire!"

"Victory is upon us!" shouted another.

"For our jam and toast!" added a third.

Altina raised her fist. “Just what I wanted to hear! Gather at the front gate once you’re done eating! We’re going to train!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The princess’s rally was met with a number of spirited replies, but also with some groans. Regis was, of course, in the latter camp.

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The officers heaped meat onto their plates before readily shoving it down their throats. The dining hall had been rowdy enough when Regis arrived, but now it was all the more so.

After noisily devouring their meals, the officers rushed out like a storm. It was their duty to ensure their troops were in orderly file for the commander, and it was time for them to flaunt the results of their daily training.

After finishing her cup of tea, Altina stood as well. “Is something the matter, Regis?” she asked. “Are you not done eating?”

“No, I was just...thinking about things,” he replied. Aside from Altina and Eric, everybody else had rushed outside.

“Well, all right. If you’re going to stay here, at least drop by later to say hi, okay?”

“Got it.”

Altina exited the hall, with Eric following along as her escort officer. Regis, meanwhile, continued staring at his empty plate. “It...might be possible,” he mumbled to himself.

In an instant, Regis hurried to his room and put pen to parchment. His quill raced across the page, and no sooner had he dotted his last sentence than he folded the letter up and secured it with his own wax seal. He flew out of the room...

“Ah!”

...and almost collided with someone in the corridor.

“Eep!”

A rather endearing cry came from a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes—Elize Archibald. Bastian had entreated Regis to safely deliver her to the south, and even now she accompanied the army as a guest.

“Ah, sorry...” Regis said. “I was in a bit of a hurry.”

“It must be something quite urgent. Please, excuse me.”

“No, not urgent enough to warrant startling a lady. My apologies,” Regis said, correcting his posture. Although the girl standing before him looked as young as a child, she seemed to be concealing a very high standing.

Elize giggled. “You know, this has been on my mind for a while, but...you hardly act like a soldier, Regis.”

“Yes, I get that a lot...”

She glanced out the window, at the Fourth Army visible just beyond the walls. The skies were beginning to darken, but the men still marched and changed formation in accordance with their orders.

“Are you going into battle again?” she asked.

“Hmm? No, they’re just training.”

“*All troops, march!*” signaled the bugle, spurring seven thousand foot soldiers to match pace and press forward. Then, after a moment—“*Right turn!*”—all the men in formation turned and started right.

Regis was astounded. “They’ve really pulled themselves together,” he said. “They were quite a mess when we left the capital.”

“I...don’t really get it,” Elize admitted. “For what reason would they make everyone walk the same way like that? It just seems like a way for a commander to lord their authority over their soldiers.”

“An uneven formation creates a weakness to be exploited. A single soldier ends up without any comrades beside him, forced to take on two or three enemy soldiers.”

“Oh, really?”

“Our soldiers train to synchronize their steps in order to keep a consistent formation when they make contact with an enemy army.”

“I fail to see why that’s so important, though. Can’t a single Belgian take on a hundred men?”

“Huh...?”

“Bastian could.”

“Yes, well... I think you’ll find that he’s an exception.”

“Ah. I should have figured.”

A hundred men? What’s that supposed to mean? Just what did the third prince get up to across the seas in High Britannia?

Elize glanced out the window again, this time with a more pained expression. “As a soldier, you might laugh at me for this, but...war terrifies me.”

“I would never. It frightens me too.”

“Is that true?”

“War brings death. I’ve feared that for as long as I’ve lived.”

“Then why go to war?”

“Because our inaction would result in even more death,” Regis replied—not that this was true for every war.

“I see...” Elize said, hanging her head. “If an enemy invades, then you have no choice but to fight.”

“And if a country shows weakness, its neighbors may even decide to take advantage of it and join the fray. That’s simply how things

stand. Personally, I pray that we can one day form a relationship where we support one another instead.”

“Ah. You mentioned something like that at Madame Bourguine’s. Pacifism, correct?”

“Indeed.”

“I agree that nations are better off working together than against each other.”

“It’s...reassuring to hear that from you.”

“Likewise. I consider it heartening to find common ground with someone in your position, Mr. Regis.” Elize exchanged a passing glance with the tactician, but neither she nor he smiled. Her expression became tinged with sorrow. “In my homeland, there were plenty of people who were against the war...yet it happened nonetheless. We were told it was for wealth and national interest, but why must people die for money?”

Regis shook his head. “Emperor Latrielle said something similar, but this assertion that war is needed for the economy... It’s a lie.”

“What?”

“One needs only look to history to see that war does not bring wealth to the populace, nor does it lead to any net gain in technological advancement.”

“But I’ve heard about tools once used for war becoming objects we use in our everyday lives.”

“Insignificant compared to the vast swathes of wisdom lost in battle. Even from a financial perspective, it would take a hundred years of war to achieve the level of economic growth that a peaceful nation sees in ten.”

“Are you certain?”

“Say there is a nation where even children must be taught to use a sword. Now, compare that to a peaceful nation that instead establishes vast trade networks and sends students to study in foreign lands. It should be plain as day which one will succeed financially.”

“Mm... I do recall a nation like that.”

In contrast to the Empire, which was always at war, High Britannia had spent several decades at peace, devoting its undivided attention to trade. By developing its industries, it had grown at a rate unseen in Belgaria, despite its landmass being only a fraction of the size. Had it not attempted such a reckless war, perhaps it may have dominated its neighbors financially instead.

“In this coming age, war between nations will come at a much greater cost, and as this new firearm circulates, battles will cease to be contests of strength. Soon, international struggles will devolve into graceless massacres. Any ruler who still wishes for war at that point must be blind to everything but their own ideals.”

“Ah...”

“Or putting on an act to draw attention away from internal failures.”

“What do you mean?”

“The role of a government is the distribution of wealth, whether that be through industry maintenance, social welfare, or the establishment of public facilities. The issue is, the upper class receives special rights, and everyone beneath them feels the inequality. As their dissatisfaction builds, the current regime finds itself under greater and greater scrutiny. That is why the ruler creates an enemy—someone to unite the people against, to foster sympathy and stifle much of the condemnation.”

Elize turned pale, aware that she might one day become a ruler herself. “If a nation’s people are dissatisfied, is it not the ruler’s duty to address their dissatisfaction?” she asked.

“Resolving national discontent is a complicated task, like trying to divide eight slices of pizza among ten people. Criticizing one’s neighbor and turning them into a reprehensible menace is quite a bit easier.”

“That can’t be!”

“There doesn’t even need to be a firm basis for this resentment; in fact, it could be a complete fabrication. Simply proclaiming that there are enemies outside the nation’s borders is enough to unify a nation under a once questionable ruler. And once the critics are removed, an ideal state is born—for the insincere statesman, at least.”

“Is that why Margaret declared war on Belgaria?” Elize asked, her fists clenched.

“In her case, I think she was put up to it by those in positions of authority. While the nation was at war, they could neglect the fair distribution of wealth, abandon those they were supposed to save, and suppress all dissenting voices.”

“Erk. How frustrating...” Elize muttered. There were tears welling up in her eyes.



I wasn't trying to make her cry...

“Most rulers start out dreaming of their ideal nation,” Regis attempted to explain, “but their fair policies are impeded by vested interests. They’re worn thin by the public’s bottomless demands, and they ultimately fall to the falsehood of a common foe. If any statesman spends more time criticizing than they do resolving internal issues, it can be safe to assume they are craving an enemy to save their own skin.”

Maybe I phrased that too harshly... Regis worried, but his words seemed to fill the young woman with resolve. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Thank you. I’ll... I’ll take your words to heart.”

“Ah, no. They’re not my words. I simply read them in a book.”

After scratching his head and giving a polite bow, Regis made haste for the front gate, where the Fourth Army was continuing its training.

Chapter 3: The Battle of Aloe-Marroe

Several days after the rainy season had ended, when there were whispers on the wind of the Etruscan Army giving up and going home...

“Thirty thousand enemy troops!” a lookout nervously reported.

The officers all gathered in the great hall of Aloe-Marroe’s fortress. A massive table sat in the center of the room, at the head of which stood Altina. The others could not take their seats while she, the commander, was standing.

Regis was standing to Altina’s left while Eric stood on guard behind her with his rifle at hand. Dorvale and the main faces of the Sixth Army were to her right, while Rockhoward stood at the foot of the table with his men from the Eighth Army.

Eddie and Abidal-Evra were also in attendance, and they helped Regis as he spread a large map over the table. “I had a faint hope we wouldn’t have to use this,” the tactician whispered, “but here we are.”

“And there’s even more of ’em now...” Eddie grumbled, earning himself a frustrated glare from Dorvale.

Now that Regis thought about it, Eddie had been stationed with the Sixth Army during the suppression of Marquis Trosa’s rebellion. Rumors also suggested that he had done barely anything of note during his time there. It seemed that he was still viewed poorly by the lieutenant general as a result, which stood to reason, considering that they had not had any meaningful interactions since.

Regis placed three blue pieces on the map, south of Aloe-Marroe. “Our walls are going to be within range of their arrows by tomorrow at the earliest,” he said. Thanks to their large search radius, they had managed to identify the enemy early.

Altina folded her arms. “It doesn’t seem like they’re trying to surprise us.”

“Indeed. They’re marching straight at us. Perhaps their victories thus far have given them more confidence.”

Dorvale, who was responsible for giving the enemy this assurance, did not seem the least bit perturbed. He had no doubt seen his fair share of victories, but he had endured more than enough losses as well; he seemed well aware that he would not be censured for this. Regis had heard in the capital that the man was an experienced veteran, but nobody had ever said that his experience came from successes. It was because of this commander that the Sixth Army carried such a lax atmosphere as a whole.

Well, there’s not much use in putting an unmotivated unit in our vanguard.

“Why has the enemy increased in number?” Rockhoward asked.

“Huh? Well, that’s because...” Regis trailed off, uncertain what to say. The Etruscan Army had presumably met with reinforcements at some point during the past month. It seemed so self-evident that he struggled to understand the point of the question.

“Isn’t it because they got reinforcements from back home?” Altina asked, answering in his stead.

“Hmm, I see...” Rockhoward muttered. “They’ve already made so much progress, yet they invest even more resources. The enemy commander must be a cautious man.”

“Sure looks like it.”

Err, they’ve brought in their reserves to make this a decisive battle, right? I imagine they’ve determined that the imperial army won’t retreat from Aloe-Marroe...

Regis pondered the question a little more before deciding it was best to move on. No matter how curious it might have been that the enemy had grown in number, the reasoning was of no real importance—at least, not in comparison to deciding their countermeasure.

“Hmm...”

It seemed that Rockhoward had a strange order of priorities, or... Yes, perhaps it was more accurate to say he tended to act on a whim. Regis would never dare say this to the man, who was the commander of an army and a noble lord, but he was like a child.

Regis sighed. Dorvale was unmotivated, while Rockhoward acted thoughtlessly. He could depend only on the Fourth Army, but the unit alone was not even half as large as the approaching enemy. He would need to make use of all the soldiers at their disposal, no matter the hardships.

“Lieutenant General Dorvale,” Regis said, “what action would you recommend we take?”

“Mm? Let’s see... Well, we have fifty thousand imperial soldiers against the enemy’s thirty thousand. We should be able to withstand a siege here in Aloe-Marroe.”

“Sticking to the fundamentals, then. How long do you intend for us to hold out?”

“How long...” Dorvale paused for a moment in thought. “Until the enemy retreats, of course!”

“I see...”

It was near impossible for a besieged city to endure forevermore, which was precisely why textbooks on military tactics advised that a point be defended until the attacking enemy exhausted themselves. Then, the defending army would switch to the offensive.

Alternatively, those under siege were taught to hold out until assistance arrived. Rather than this being a textbook example, however, there was also another factor at play.

“But what should we do if we hole ourselves up and the enemy never comes?” Eddie asked, posing the very question on Regis’s mind.

“Then there will be no battle,” Dorvale loathingly replied. “Is that not good enough?”

“But we have close to fifty thousand soldiers here, as well as all the civilians in town. And the supplies the Fourth Army brought will only last around two months,” Eddie noted, his head tilted quizzically. Regis’s calculations produced similar results—four months at most, if they rationed well enough.

“Then we should begin evacuating the residents,” Dorvale said, “and fast.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that?”

“You haven’t changed one bit!” Dorvale snapped. “Always looking for faults! Never having any ideas of your own!”

Eddie scratched his head. “Well, I guess you’re right.”

He might not have any better ideas, but that doesn’t make his point invalid. It should still be taken into consideration.

Altina groaned. “Regis. You decide.”

That might be faster.

Regis had intended to exchange ideas until the officers were fully on board and morale was high, but perhaps he was hoping for a little too much. That was when it occurred to him—he was feeling a peculiar amount of stress. This situation wasn’t so uncommon to him, and yet...

He racked his brain, trying to understand why.

Ah. It's because I took command of the First Army. This is much too different from what I've gotten used to, Regis suddenly realized. Every single soldier in Latrielle's service had shown unfaltering devotion to their homeland and a willingness to fight until their dying breath. *In other words, I've been pampered.*

He repeated back to himself the words he told Altina, rebuking himself for his complacency.

This is about what you should expect from frontier units.

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"The enemy sees Aloe-Marroe as the site of a decisive battle," Regis said, deciding to change gears. "I presume this because they are bringing their reserves into this engagement. As I'm sure everyone here is aware, mobilizing ten thousand troops requires immense budgeting and preparation. Etruria intends to win this war and claim Belgaria's southern territories. They intend to redraw the map."

"Not on my watch!" Altina proclaimed, eliciting agreeing nods from the nearby officers.

"Right... Well, instead of us enduring a siege, I propose we meet our enemy on the plains."

"Huh?!"

It was Altina who cried out in surprise. She had been there when Inspector Frank recounted the unfortunate defense of Sembione. In fact, on that occasion, Regis had openly described the proposal to engage Etruria as foolish. The others were just as surprised—especially Rockhoward, who had made and already suffered the consequences of said proposal.

"You're still young and inexperienced, Tactician," Rockhoward said. "We may be able to outnumber them, but I'm not so sure about

leaving our base unattended. We won't be able to respond quickly enough if any accidents happen there."

Like a fire? Regis wanted to ask, but he quickly decided it was too malicious of a response. "In that case, I shall leave the defense of Aloe-Marroe to the Eighth Army."

"What?"

"You have just stated that we cannot leave our base unattended. I believe the duty should fall to the unit most conscious of this fact."

"Hmm... But if my army stays behind, it will appear as though we cowered within the safe city walls while a victory was handed to us. As a warrior, I cannot accept this."

He's worried about his reputation after we win? I suppose that's somewhat appropriate for a soldier. Maybe a little idiotic, but... I really do think he needs to get his priorities in order.

"There's no need to worry," Regis assured the lieutenant general.

"The ministry that once evaluated its officers on mere hearsay is gone, and its authorities have been entrusted to the *généralissime*. She is not someone who would fail to understand the importance of defense. Isn't that right, *Généralissime*?"

"Hmm? Oh, me?" Altina asked. She was still unaccustomed to being addressed as the *généralissime*. "Yep! Absolutely! Our base is very important."

"Perhaps even the *most* important, wouldn't you agree?"

"Huh? I'm not sure I'd..." Altina was about to disagree, but then she noticed the prompting look her tactician was giving her. "Oh, of course! How could anything be more valuable?"

This seemed to put Rockhoward in a fine mood. "If my efforts are indeed going to be evaluated fairly, then I can fight with peace of

mind. Just leave the defense of Aloe-Marroe to the Eighth Army! I won't let a single soldier breach our walls!"

At the end of the lined-up officers, Inspector Frank offered a bitter smile. Perhaps he understood the situation as a way to remove an untrustworthy commander from the battlefield, but it was much more than that. Regis had now ensured that the city would remain well defended.

Nothing would cause greater chaos than an army leaving its base only to learn that its foe had somehow gotten behind them. This was a plan that Regis personally employed...and if the enemy commander was competent, they would surely attempt the same.

I'm not the only one who uses schemes here. I need to be cautious.

To reassure the men, Regis was opting to keep twenty thousand troops in the city.

Dorvale looked anxious. "Does this mean we're taking on thirty thousand men with equal or lesser numbers?" he asked.

"Yes. Numerically speaking."

"Is that not too reckless?"

"Imperial soldiers are strong. I see no reason why we would struggle against a force the same size as our own, especially when our enemy's coordination is impeded by the inclusion of their reserves. I'm sure the Sixth Army's soldiers are very well rested."

"No, well... The truth is, we have many injured men. We will need more than a few weeks before we are in peak condition."

"Understood. In that case, the Fourth Army shall take the vanguard and the Sixth Army the rear guard," Regis said. He added red and yellow pieces to the map as he spoke, representing the Fourth and Sixth Armies, respectively.

“Hmm...” Dorvale still seemed reluctant, but it was Belgian common sense that imperial soldiers would never lose against an equally sized army. For the most part, the history books confirmed this as fact.

“This is going to be easy!” Altina exclaimed, her chest puffed out. “The soldiers of the Fourth Army have gotten so strong that they could even best the First Army!”

“Right...” Regis said. “Well, I must apologize to you gentlemen of the Sixth Army, but you might not have many opportunities to fight. Of course, I still hope you will come fully prepared.”

Dorvale paused again for a long moment. “In that case... Very well.” Obstinate refusing to join the battle would put the *généralissime* in a bad mood, so he ultimately conceded with a begrudging nod.

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The next day, early morning—

The rising sun stretched the town’s shadow far across the level plains. Beyond this shadow, fifty arpents (3,573 meters) west of Aloe-Marroe, the Fourth Army had taken formation. Its troops were stretched out wide to intercept the enemy army coming from the south.

Behind the Fourth Army was the Sixth Army, of which Lieutenant General Dorvale was taking command. As they were being kept from the front lines, many of the more experienced hands felt none of the tension that usually came from the battlefield. To the west was a flowing river, and to the north, behind them, was a large lake.

The imperial army was staring down its foe head-on, with a river to its right, a city to its left, and a lake at its rear.

Lake

River

Sixth Army

Eighth Army

Aloe-Marroe

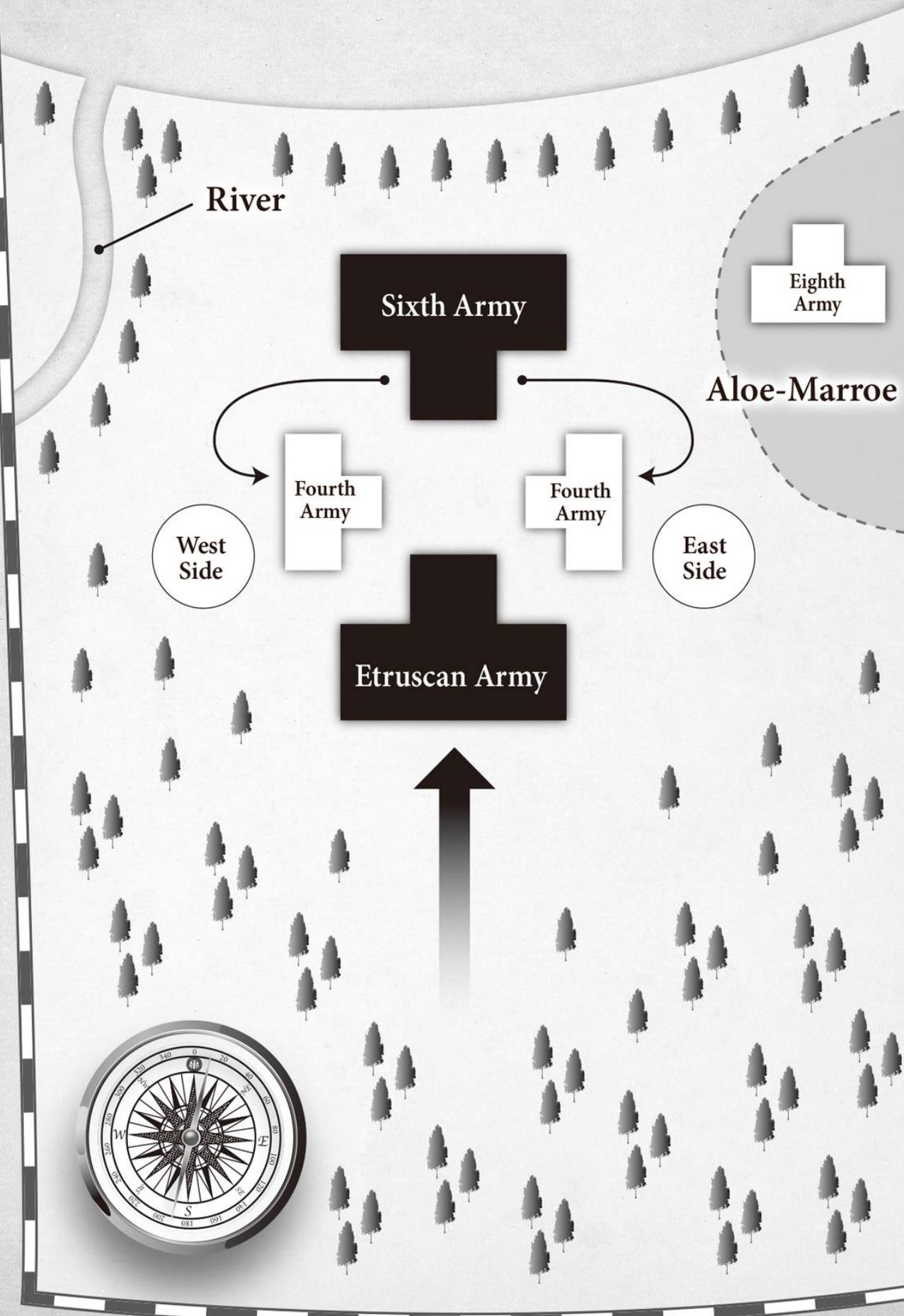
Fourth Army

Fourth Army

West Side

East Side

Etruscan Army



At the Fourth Army's main camp, Altina was riding atop her trusty steed. Regis was atop a separate horse beside her; there was no way he could continue sharing with the commander, so he had taken action to preserve his dignity.

Of course, he was still unable to ride a horse, so Eric was holding the reins.

"Regis," Eddie said as he came up beside them, "we're a pretty unusual distance from Aloe-Marroe, huh?"

"We are."

"We're too far away to involve the fortress's cannons, but close enough that those stationed there can see how things develop. It's hard to say whether our base is a part of the battle or not. Maybe this is a simple fight on the plains that just happens to have a city nearby."

"If the enemy commander becomes overly conscious of that, I would consider this a success."

"Hmm. So it doesn't really matter then?"

"This is just a battle on the plains."

The twenty thousand soldiers of the Eighth Army stationed inside Aloe-Marroe were at no point scheduled to march out. They were not completely out of mind, but Regis did not have to take them into consideration when taking command.

"To begin with," Regis explained, "there is little point in bolstering our numbers with an army that can't coordinate with us. We're better off using them elsewhere."

"That's a surprise. You think Dorvale's going to be a safer bet?"

"I do."

“The Sixth Army probably won’t cooperate with you either.”

“Perhaps, but they have many veteran soldiers and an abundance of experience in the field. I think they should prove decently capable in a fight.”

From the records that Regis had seen, the Sixth Army had seen a considerable number of engagements and yet rarely ever lost soldiers. It served as evidence that they were a tenacious and well-coordinated bunch.

Eddie shrugged. “Motivation is pretty important too, though. They’re bound to leave all the work to the Fourth Army.”

“Yes, I’ll admit, we may have some trouble if they don’t rally themselves soon. Protecting the south was originally their duty, after all.”

“Do you have a plan? Are you going to put out a bounty or something?”

“Unfortunately, even with the *généralissime*’s council at our disposal, our army doesn’t have the funds. In Belgaria, standard practice is for nobles to hire armies at their own expense. We aren’t quite so fortunate.”

Altina’s mother had been a commoner, and although Altina herself was royalty, she was afforded very little funding. This was especially problematic considering how large her army was becoming. At present, there were over eight thousand from the Fourth Army accompanying her in the south, and when combined with those guarding the headquarters in the capital, the detachment sent east, and the garrison stationed in Fort Volks, their numbers surpassed twenty thousand. The Seventh Army was likely to join her, and it was possible that the Sixth and Eighth Armies would end up under the princess’s direct control.

If everything continued as expected, Altina was soon going to have seventy thousand soldiers to provide for. And then there were the countless other expenses to consider. Regis could feel his blood run cold just thinking about it.

“Urgh...” he groaned. “We really don’t have enough money.”

“That’s, uh...”

“Ah, no. There’s nothing to worry about. Funds or no funds, I know a thousand ways to motivate an army.”

As their conversation continued, a messenger raced over and kneeled before Altina. “The enemy is headed toward us!” he announced.

“Just as Regis predicted,” the princess replied with a nod.

“Well, it was hardly a prediction,” Regis interjected. “More like an inevitability.”

“Really?” Eric asked. “I was honestly a little worried... I thought the enemy would head toward Aloe-Marroe instead.”

“Had they attempted that, we would have just flanked them.”

Most formations were well protected against attacks from the front but weak to attacks from the sides and rear. It would be utterly foolish for the Etruscan Army to expose its back to Belgaria’s main force—the enemy commander seemed to at least understand this much.

That’s good.

Eric seemed to be pondering something. “If you’re fighting alone and someone comes at you from the side, can you not just turn to face them?”

“Yes, but only assuming that the flanking enemy was anticipated and advance preparation was made. If such an attack is unexpected, the army simply falls apart.”

“Hmm?”

Eric had very little experience with formations, and on the few occasions he had joined a battle large enough to warrant one, he had never fallen victim to a surprise attack from behind. He was fortunate, to say the least; only the lucky or the strong survived such encounters.

“This is purely hypothetical, but say the enemy surprised the Sixth Army from behind,” Regis said, pointing behind himself. “There’s a lake there, so that could never actually happen, but...use your imagination.”

Naturally, they had thoroughly investigated the lake before taking formation.

Eric cocked his head. “If our enemy did come from behind, couldn’t the soldiers in the Sixth Army simply turn around and deal with them?”

“And what if, at the same time, an enemy is charging them from the front? Thirty thousand from the front, an unknown force from the rear. How many soldiers should turn to face this new foe?”

“Hmm... Those making up the back half. So about ten thousand men, right?”

“It would take perhaps five minutes for that order to be conveyed. During that time, the army may fall into chaos. Some soldiers will have turned around of their own volition. Others will have remained facing forward. There are also those who will have fled or fallen out of rank due to the surprise attack. Just how many soldiers might be lost before unity is restored...?”

“Mm... Then what about the side? If the enemy comes from the side, you can at least see if your allies are struggling. Then you can just help them out when necessary. No need for any confusion.”

“Yes, precisely. This is why a well-trained unit that has fostered good judgment is also strong against surprise attacks. Next, we need to consider lines. Look around you.”

“All right.”

They were in the center of the Fourth Army, so there were soldiers all around. Perhaps owing to their proximity to the commander, the lines they stood in were as precise as if they had been measured out with a ruler.

Upon seeing Eric cock his head once again, Regis decided to explain. “They’re standing close enough to be touching shoulders with the people beside them. We talked about this a little before, but a gap in the formation means one soldier might end up having to face two or three enemies alone.”

“Ah, that’s right! The foot soldiers are in a tight-knit formation.”

“Indeed, and they’re stronger the closer together they are, since this creates a localized numerical advantage. But, to return to our hypothetical, say there’s a surprise attack. What happens when the soldiers attempt to turn in this formation?”

“Oh!”

Humans naturally swing their arms and legs as they walk, and without the necessary space, their movement would be severely restricted. Each soldier was given enough space in front of and behind them as a result, but even then, they were ill-suited to sideways turns.

“They are trained to change formation, of course,” Regis added. “But reorganizing in the midst of a battle is rarely easy. How many

minutes do you think it would take for ten thousand men to recreate their formation?”

“I see it now!”

“And above all else, an attack from the sides or the rear lowers morale, since it suggests the commander was outsmarted. You can’t win with soldiers who have lost the will to fight.”

The psychological aspect was also important.

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“The enemy army has reached the four arpent mark!”

Upon hearing the messenger’s call, Regis raised a hand. “Princess!” he shouted.

“Riflemen!” Altina shouted in turn as she thrust out her massive blade. “Take aim!”



The foot soldiers lined at the very front readied their brand-new Belgian-made Fusil 851s. The guns had been further simplified since the prototype Latrielle had shown Regis; the barrels were longer, but they were lighter overall.

A bugle sounded on the princess's order.

“Ouvrez le feu!”

Each rifleman squeezed down on his trigger, moving the sear inside his gun from its notch, activating a spring-action bolt that hammered a firing pin into the chamber. Sparks burst forth as the pin struck the primer in the back of the loaded paper casing and the propellant gunpowder ignited.

To ensure the explosive pressure was well contained, the gaps in the firearm's bolt mechanism were sealed with rubber rings. This gave the Fusil 851 a greater output than any foreign gun, and its unique rifling allowed the bullet packed into the tip of each casing to gain spin as it passed through the barrel and exploded out the end.

Altina had waited until the enemy was only four arpents (286 meters) away before giving the order to open fire, but this was only for the sake of the soldiers who were more accustomed to using the old guns. In the hands of more experienced riflemen, the Fusil 851 could effectively manage distances of around fourteen arpents (1,000 meters).

The crash of overlapping gunshots quickly became a thunderous roar, and countless bullets tore through the air. One by one, Etruscan soldiers dropped to the ground and moved no more, struck from such a distance that they could not even make out the faces of whomever had shot them. Belgaria's new guns were more powerful, more precise, and easier to load than the previous model. The next shots were ready in an instant.

The results were soon conveyed to the Fourth Army's headquarters: "The riflemen have taken out a hundred enemy soldiers!" It was such grand news that the officers almost jumped for joy.

"Not too shabby!" Altina said with a nod.

"Right..." Regis muttered. He was wary of optimism clouding his judgment, so he tried to keep a level head. They had received a mere two hundred units of the Fusil 851, and only three days before the battle. Furthermore, although the riflemen had prepared themselves, they lacked practice with the new guns. Nobody could dispute that they were a hastily assembled force.

Even so, they seem to be hitting one of every two shots at this distance...

It seemed reasonable to assume that, with enough training under their belts, the riflemen would be able to hit most of their shots even at fourteen arpents.

Regis was soon pulled from his thoughts by another report: "The Etruscan Army has commenced its charge!"

Considering the distance, it would take the enemy between a minute and a half and two minutes to get close enough to use their spears. Had the Belgarian riflemen been using their old guns, this would have been enough time for a seasoned hand to load and fire only a single bullet. With the new guns, they could manage an additional four shots.

It was an impressive increase in output, but with a fifty percent accuracy rate, these additional volleys would only take out four hundred enemy soldiers. The new guns had given Belgaria an advantage, but a meager two hundred was not enough to turn the tide of the battle.

We'll need at least two thousand to make effective use of them.

“That should do as a trial run,” Regis said. “Let’s have the riflemen come back.”

“Understood,” Altina replied. “Riflemen, retreat!”

Upon receiving the command, the bugler played another predetermined melody, signaling the front line to fall back.

That was fast...

It had become standard procedure in the Fourth Army that, before a battle commenced, Regis’s propositions needed to pass through Altina; only when the princess issued the order would the messengers run and the bugles blare. Once the battle was underway, however, his words would automatically be treated as orders. Wasting time on protocol would only result in unnecessary deaths, so Altina wanted things to be streamlined more than anyone.

“Here they come, Regis!” she shouted.

“Yeah... I can see.”

Etruscan soldiers raced toward them, and the Fourth Army intercepted. Men on both sides let out throat-straining cries and thrust their spears as friend met foe, radiating murderous intent. No matter their determination, many would end up torn through and dying steeped in their own blood. It was a sight that made Regis’s heart ache no matter how many times he saw it.

Regis raised one hand. At this stage in the battle, his words would be lost among the bellowing and clatter of the fighting soldiers. That was why he had given his orders in advance. The bugles sounded on his signal, and a moment later, the Fourth Army’s front line collapsed.

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The Fourth Army was halved perfectly down the center, and the Etruscan Army pressed through like a sharpened blade through

meat. They charged with such force that they were soon upon the main camp in the center of the formation.

“Whoa-oo-oo!” Regis cried as he clung desperately to Eric’s horse.

“A-A little slower, please!”

“They’ll catch up to us!” Eric replied.

“Then hurry on more carefully, please!”

His request was ignored.

Regis was thrown around so easily by the galloping horse that he nearly fell from its back a great many times. *If my life is going to be taken in this battle, now is probably the time...* he mused, almost resigned to his fate. It was only in his realization that there would most likely be no books in heaven that he found his will to live. There were so many volumes he still needed to read—so many series he hadn’t completed, and so many new ones scheduled for release.

“Mr. Regis!” Eric cried. “The back of our unit is under attack!”

“Please hurry!” Regis shouted in response. There was nothing more he could say—that is, until it struck him that the red-haired young woman who was supposed to be racing ahead of them had vanished, horse and all. “Where’s Altina?!”

“Huh?! Oh no!”

The next thing Regis knew, her voice was coming from behind them. She was swinging the sword of the Empire.

“Hyaaaaaah!”

It was unthinkable, but the royal princess—the woman who was serving not only as the *généralissime*, but as the supreme commander of all the forces stationed at Aloe-Marroe—was fighting back enemy soldiers to assist her retreating troops. She wielded her massive, heavy blade with both hands.

“That’s enough of you!”

Altina had the advantage atop her horse, and she managed to slice straight through the spears of her foes. It was clear to see that she had gotten stronger. Not too long ago, she had claimed that Latrielle could best her at swordplay and Jerome on horseback, but what if they were to fight her now?

Seeing the princess swing around such a massive blade as though it were a regular longsword was uncanny, to say the least. It was as though she were wielding a prop in some poorly made play. She was fast, yet she boasted an overwhelming strength that was especially conspicuous in comparison to the averagely trained Etruscan soldiers. As she continued to fight, the Belgarian troops in her presence quickly regained their morale.

“Don’t let the enemy reach the princess!” one cried.

“Yeah!” agreed another. “Push ’em back!”

“Show them the true strength of the Empire!”

Regis started to panic; the last thing he wanted was for them all to exhaust themselves. “Princess!” he shouted. His voice struggled to contest the clamor of the soldiers, but Altina had good ears. Upon regaining herself, she reorganized her forces and retreated, promptly returning to the main camp.

“Are you all right, Regis?!” the princess asked.

“You’ve certainly shaved a few years off my lifespan... What possessed you to do something like that?!”

“I can’t just leave my allies when they’re being attacked!”

“Well...that’s the sort of plan this is!”

Even as the Etruscan Army continued to charge, the Fourth Army’s main camp was safely out of reach. Altina’s soldiers had intentionally

parted for the enemy, who was now headed...straight for the Sixth Army.

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Having an army of over ten thousand soldiers meant there was quite a distance from the front of the formation to its rear. Although the vanguard was engaged in combat, those stationed close to the rear lines had so little to do that they were almost weary. Of course, the yells, screams, and clashes of swords and spears were a constant reminder of exactly where they were, but the more experienced soldiers could tell when things were going to be uneventful.

Those stationed far from the battle had no arrows or bullets to worry about, and the soldiers of the Sixth Army were well acquainted with the battlefield. Some were even comfortable enough to banter with one another. They remained as calm as if they were back in town, chatting over a beverage or two.

“That place at the corner?” one of the soldiers asked. “Forget about it. The oil they use there is real crummy. You can tell from the taste.”

“Knew there was something off about the place. I don’t think there’s been a single time when my stomach hasn’t spited me for going there.”

“Yeah? Then why do you keep going back?”

“It’s cheap. What more have I gotta say?”

“I swear, you’re gonna soil yourself one of these days.”

A few of the soldiers began to chuckle. They were doing their best to keep their voices down, to avoid earning the scorn of their higher-ups, but their bodies still trembled in revelry. The sounds of battle were growing fiercer up ahead. Things were finally becoming serious.

“Can’t the Fourth Army take care of this themselves?” one of the soldiers grumbled, looking fed up. “People are always calling ’em war heroes and elites.”

“Well, they’ve got eight thousand with a decent cavalry. I reckon they’ll take out at least half of those Etruscans.”

“You think that’ll be enough to send ’em packing?”

“A man can dream.”

“Aah... I want some ale.”

“You *want* some? I *need* some.”

“Why’s it gotta be so hot?”

“Gah! Don’t say that! Now you’ve got me thinking about it too. Feels even hotter now!”

“Really? Is that how it works? I’ll make sure only you hear me next time, then.”

“Stop. Seriously.”

“Oi. Voices down,” one of the other soldiers interjected. “Keep this up and the captain’s gonna have our necks.”

“Hah. We’ve got nothing to worry about. Especially with how noisy things are getting up ahead.”

“Hold up. Isn’t it getting a bit *too* noisy?”

At this revelation, the soldiers began exchanging dubious glances.

“You’re right about that.”

“It’s getting louder...”

“Are they...approaching us?”

It wasn't long after they voiced these suspicions that the enemy appeared right before their eyes. Etruscan soldiers had cleaved through the Fourth Army and were now closing in with their spears.

"Hraaah!"

"Eep!"

The soldiers at the very front of the Sixth Army's formation screamed and tried to shuffle back, but there were twenty thousand men blocking their escape and a lake behind them.

A hysteric report reached the Sixth Army's main camp: "The Etruscans have breached the Fourth Army! They're charging straight at us!"

"Say what?!" Dorvale sputtered, so taken aback that he did a double take. His officers were similarly losing their heads and preparing to flee.

"General, o-order a retreat!"

"A retreat?!" Dorvale repeated. "You simpleton! Where are we supposed to go?!"

There had initially been some space between the Sixth Army's formation and the lake, but the soldiers had started inching back on their own once they grasped the situation. Retreating through the lake would be no midsummer dip in the shallows either; although the infantrymen wore light armor, their movement was too restricted for those who fell to keep themselves above water. They had, in effect, painted themselves into a corner.

"East!" one of the other officers cried. "Head east!"

They were blocked in by a river to the west, but to the east was an open plain—and the city of Aloe-Marroe. The officers quickly came to a consensus that they should return to base and restructure...but that wasn't possible either.

“The Fourth Army’s cavalry is blocking our escape!” a messenger suddenly announced.

“Blocking our escape?!” Dorvale shrieked. “What is *that* supposed to mean?!”

“I-I really don’t know, sir...” the messenger replied. His job was simply to relay the information he was given, so this much was natural.

“The tactician...” one of the officers murmured. “He was the one who deployed us here!”

Dorvale kicked the ground with all his might. “He planned this from the start, that coward!” He racked his brain for what to do, but a follow-up report came in before any specific orders could be given.

“Our front line has made contact!”

Faced with such confusion, most regular units would simply fall to pieces, but these were soldiers of the Belgarian Army. Many of them were seasoned veterans, and even the less experienced among them were far from weak. The moment Etruria’s spears were thrust toward them, their worried expressions turned stiff.

“Brace, men!” one of the soldiers called as those standing at the front of the Sixth Army’s formation readied their massive shields. These shields were large enough to half cover their bodies and were normally to be used against arrows, but the men angled them to intercept the oncoming thrusts.

Etruscan spears slipped along the well-polished wooden surfaces and were diverted upward, causing the attackers to stumble forward. Polearms were of much less use at such close range, and although the Belgarians faced the same issue, their weapons were considerably shorter—only slightly longer than the men were tall. Those in the Sixth Army were afforded a clear advantage as a result; the lancers in the second line from the front thrust through the gaps

between the shields, impaling the enemy soldiers as they were drawn in.

“Take that!”

“Gwah?!”

An Etruscan who had thrown aside his spear and attempted to draw his sword fell to the ground. He was accompanied a moment later by a Belgarian whose shield proved unable to block a spear.

When the front line was under attack, the speed at which the formation could repair itself was vital. Pressing forward thoughtlessly was a quick way to wind up dead. Soldiers on both sides pushed their enemy back and offered their comrades support as more men emerged from behind to fill any newly formed gaps.

Although the Sixth Army had initially fallen into disarray, once they were forced into an engagement, they exhibited a solid understanding of combat.

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Regis watched from horseback as his plan continued to unfold. “The Sixth Army has a lot of seasoned hands,” he said. “They got back on their feet rather quickly.”

“They’re holding firm,” Eric observed in frank agreement.

“They blocked the initial charge with their shields and managed to level the playing field, despite the situation. The men holding them must be strong. They’re like a sturdy wall.”

The Etruscan Army had charged with considerable force, yet barely any holes had opened up in the Sixth Army’s defenses. Its front line remained firm, and the robust soldiers lined up with their massive shields were like a castle rampart.

“Amazing...” Regis muttered. “I’ve seen many units so far, but I can’t remember any of them forming such a sturdy defensive line. If we were to compare just the foot soldiers, they might be even greater than the First Army.”

“It’s like they have no openings!” Eric exclaimed in wonder.

“Normally, when an army is faced with an enemy charge, the front line falls back and the rear supports, allowing them to carefully absorb the impact. But the Sixth Army didn’t need to fall back at all.”

Retreating had never been an option, since the Sixth Army had a lake at their backs, but necessity alone would not have been enough to explain what they had achieved. Each soldier possessed an incredible amount of skill, and their effective response had sowed confusion among the Etruscan ranks.

The charging Etruscan soldiers had expected to easily push through the Sixth Army’s front line, so when they were met with greater resistance than they had anticipated, they quickly devolved into chaos. Those leading the charge soon found themselves pinned as their unaware comrades continued pushing forward from behind. Some fell out of their positions, and their formation became increasingly disordered.

Regis was too unsteady on horseback to attempt a shrug, but he would have under any other circumstance. “Just what are Etruria’s officers doing?” he wondered aloud. “It’s their duty to maintain the lines.”

In the Empire, military academies taught all officers, no matter their birth, how to take command of a unit between ten and a hundred men strong. It was the duty of the squad leaders to keep order in small, localized patches. Knowing how to command armies of over a thousand people was normally only relevant to nobles, so this was not usually taught.

“Mr. Regis,” Eric said from his position at the front of the horse, “you were taught how to command armies of ten thousand men, weren’t you? I’ve heard that if your talents are recognized, you can receive instruction as a potential tactician.”

“Ten thousand men? No, I was never taught any such skills...”

“That’s...surprising. So you’re relying on your education commanding units of up to a hundred, then?”

“No, not even that,” Regis admitted. “I was never taught a thing about taking command during my time at the academy.”

“Huh?! Why’s that?!”

“They said such information was wasted on a man who can’t even ride a horse.”

“Oh...”

It was standard procedure in the Empire for commanders to take charge from horseback. Leading ten people was possible on foot, perhaps, but being able to ride a horse was absolutely necessary to command a hundred men. Regis had shown such great proficiency in military tactics that his instructors had urged him to practice riding no matter what it took...but he had instead spent his time reading books.

Regis frowned. “To be honest, I wanted to be an administrative officer who worked only behind the scenes, doing paperwork, managing inventory, and the like.” His ultimate goal had been to work in the military library. It was a path that he still sometimes longed for, but his position as strategist of the *généralissime*’s council meant it was now nothing more than a pipe dream.

Farewell, my future absorbed in books...

“Regis!” Altina shouted. Her voice brought the tactician back to reality. “What now?!”

“It’s...about time we reverse course.”

The bugle sounded as soon as Regis gave his order, and the divided Fourth Army swiftly changed its orientation. The on-site officers had already known about the move, and their soldiers had undergone so much training in preparation that their reorganization went smoothly.

The main camp had made east, and orders were passed to the western half of the Fourth Army using flag signals. They were a little slower to react as a result, but this was not much of a problem.

“Had we simply split up, I’m sure the Etruscan Army would have chased us down,” Regis said. “Had they attacked our rear, I think we really would have been obliterated, but they have the Sixth Army ahead of them now.”

Altina walked up beside Regis on her horse and nodded. “They can’t just ignore that,” she said.

“Indeed. The Sixth Army contains twenty thousand troops, after all, making it more than twice the size of the Fourth Army that just turned tail. Anyone would think that was our main force.”

The Etruscan Army could not risk turning away from its biggest threat. The enemy commander seemed reliant on fundamental tactics—Regis could tell this much from how they had moved their troops thus far—which made them easy to read.

And now, there was a new factor to account for.

Even with their backs to the lake, the twenty thousand of the Sixth Army held down the thirty thousand of the Etruscan Army. Meanwhile, the two units of the Fourth Army, numbering four thousand each, turned to attack their foe in the flank.

“Chaaarge!” Altina declared, brandishing her sword.

Regis bit down on his lip as the Etruscan Army endured the sudden attack. “Aren’t they going to retreat...?”

“Hmm?”

He had barely muttered his concern, but it was evidently enough for Eric to have heard. “A half-encircled army is better off retreating while simultaneously concentrating troops on either the left or right enemy detachment,” Regis explained, seemingly talking to himself. “Controlling an army of thirty thousand is no easy matter, but otherwise, they’ll expose both flanks.”

“That sounds about right.”

“Many commanders only ever order charges and retreats. I think there should be more organic tactics out there as well.”

“The Fourth Army is the only army I know with so many different bugle commands.”

“I consider this the bare minimum...”

“Even though we have a specific tune for, ‘Split up so it looks like you’re desperately running away, but pretend you’re unable to outrun them’?”

“My aim is for the entire army to move like a single living organism,” Regis said. How he was actually going to achieve this, he was still unsure.

Regis let out a deep breath. Attacks from both sides had caused mayhem in the Etruscan Army. There was nothing for him to do now but leave things to Altina and the other officers; eventually, their opponent would surrender.

At least, that should have been the case.

“Regis!” Altina called, turning to him with a doubtful expression. “Something’s happening!”

“Huh?”

Regis followed the princess’s gaze from their main camp in the eastern detachment of the Fourth Army to the rear of their formation, where there seemed to be a ruckus brewing. There were horsemen where there should not have been horsemen.

Are they from the Empire?! No, the Flying Swallow Knights should be east of the Sixth Army. They can’t have moved. Are they enemy reinforcements, then?!

Just as Regis tried to figure out what was going on, a messenger raced in. “Our rear is under attack!” he cried. “The lines are a mess!”

A surprise attack?!

Regis was so taken aback that he almost fell from his horse. His chest burned so intensely that he felt as though the devil itself were gripping his heart.

Chapter 4: The Cost of Betrayal

This was the great flaw in a plan where the strategic headquarters was ever moving. The High Britannian Royal Army had employed a similar tactic, splitting their forces in two to counteract and encircle an enemy charge. Belgaria did not have the same number of guns at its disposal, but the movements were the same—aside from them having the additional variable of the Sixth Army at the front to stop Etruria’s advance.

Back then, Regis had employed a cavalry charge against High Britannia. A moving camp meant it was harder for messengers to convey orders, which was a considerable danger in itself. No matter how much attention an army paid to its surroundings, its reaction time would suffer without easy access to reports.

Regis groaned. Now, he found himself suffering exactly the same problem. *How could I have permitted a cavalry attack without realizing it?!*

“From where...?!”

Not only was Regis certain that he had a full grasp of the enemy deployment, but he had also spread out a more-than-sufficient surveillance network specifically to prevent this outcome.

“A-About that...” The messenger dropped to one knee. “The ones attacking us are the Eighth Army’s cavalry!”

“What?!” Altina roared. “They betrayed us?!” She spoke with such ferocious intensity that even the seasoned warriors around her shuddered.

“I-I don’t know!” the messenger stammered. His shoulders trembled with each shallow breath.

A betrayal through a surprise attack? Does this mean Rockhoward was in contact with Etruria? If so, was his careless conduct all an act? Did he feign incompetence to make us lower our guard? What now?!

There was no time.

I need to make a decision, here and now!

Regis searched through the library in his head and picked out a single book from the many he had committed to memory. He wasted no time in flipping through its pages.

“Have the Fourth Army’s western division change direction and start heading south,” he said. The order was immediately relayed via the sounding of a bugle.

“Not north?!” Eric exclaimed.

“You mean to get support from the Sixth Army, I assume?”

“Right.”

“Well, what if they intend to betray us too?”

“That... That can’t be!”

“We need to prepare for the worst-case scenario.”

We’re up against thirty thousand from Etruria and twenty thousand from the Eighth Army. If we’re especially unfortunate, we’ll need to take on the twenty thousand of the Sixth Army as well. Seventy thousand in total, against an army of eight thousand divided into two. We’ll need a miracle even for Altina to make it out alive.

Regis could feel a shiver run down his spine as he shouted out further orders. “Tell the Flying Swallows to free the Sixth Army and go after the cavalry—”

No. Something about their situation was much too peculiar. Regis had grown too heated and desperate in his attempt to counteract,

but now there was a more collected voice in his head offering a new perspective.

This is...impossible, right? I mean, think about it.

This was far from an opportune moment for Rockhoward to betray the Empire. Back when the Fourth Army had been stationed inside Aloe-Marroe, he could have simply marched his soldiers into Regis's personal room. The tactician wouldn't have been able to do a thing to stop him.

Then again, such an act of treason would be met with the harshest sentence that Belgaria could offer. The betraying commander would end up beheaded, as would their family, friends, and officers. It was hard to imagine that Etruria could offer anything worth such a serious risk.

A betrayal is...impossible. But then why are they attacking us from behind...?

Perhaps they really had turned coat, but for a reason that Regis simply could not imagine. Perhaps it was a decision that had been made on the spur of the moment.

I should give the order to fend them off at once, but...

"Urgh... G-Gnn..."

"Regis?!" Altina cried.

He needed to do what he could to protect the princess. But at the same time, he was certain that this young woman, who had mastered using the Empire's treasured sword, would never fall to another knight.

"Keep the Flying Swallows where they are!" Regis ordered. "We'll meet the Eighth Army here at our main camp!"

"So we're fighting?" Altina asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’m going to have to rely on you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that!”

The ruckus behind them grew even louder as a cavalry drew near, parting all the ranks in its path. They were knights of the Empire—there was no doubting that. The crest of the Eighth Army was proudly emblazoned on their chests.

They were fast. The disorder in the Fourth Army must have played a part in allowing them to proceed without resistance, but even then, they had fought their way through the formation’s rear and were approaching the main camp far too quickly. To make matters worse, none other than Rockhoward himself was taking the lead.

“Graaaaaah!”

“Traacherous lout!” Altina shouted as she prepared for battle. “I’ll teach you a lesson you’ll never forget!”

The riders of the Eighth Army breached the main camp and came straight for them. Rockhoward was holding his spear high, and as he reached the princess, he cried:

“*Généralissime!* Are you safe?!”

Altina froze. The most she could muster was a quiet, “Huh...?”

Regis had no idea what to say either. His mind was completely blank.

“Fweh...?” Altina absentmindedly exclaimed. She was frozen in place like a statue, her massive sword stalled just before she could lower it on Rockhoward.

“It seems you are uninjured,” the lieutenant general said with a relieved exhale. “Thank goodness.”

“Er...what?”

“I saw the Fourth Army crumble from the ramparts and rushed out to help in your time of crisis! I’m glad we made it before it was too late! Just leave the rest to the Eighth Army!”

Altina was stunned into dumbfounded silence, as was Regis. It was simply too much. By now, the eastern edge of the encirclement had fallen apart, and the Etruscan Army was getting back on its feet. Rockhoward had inadvertently afforded time to the enemy commander—time that they used to regain their unit.

The Etruscan Army was reorganizing and reforming its battle lines, and once its commander had a full grasp of the situation, it promptly began its retreat. This was an appropriate decision—a third of the Etruscan soldiers had already fallen, and Belgaria would be unable to pursue the remaining forces without risking considerable losses. The enemy had been on the very cusp of surrender, but now that moment had slipped through the Empire’s fingers.

“Don’t pursue them too far,” Regis said, feeling as though he were speaking in the voice of a stranger. “Please stay in formation.”

The messenger offered a solemn nod in response, and soon enough, a sorrowful tune escaped the bugles. It was safe to call this a victory for Belgaria. They had achieved many things, and yet the air of a defeated army loomed over them.

“*Généralissime!* Ma’am! The enemy is fleeing!” Rockhoward exclaimed.

“I guess they are.”

“My horsemen are still in good health! Please, allow me permission to pursue them!”

Altina said nothing.

“Please!” Rockhoward repeated. “I shall return with their commander’s head on a pike!”

The princess had been so exuberant just a short while ago, but now she looked as though she had endured three consecutive all-nighters slaving over paperwork. Even with the numerous precedents he had already set, Rockhoward proved that his stupidity exceeded all expectations.

Finally, she managed a response. "I ordered the Eighth Army to defend our base, did I not? To defend the city and never come out, under any circumstances."

"Yes, ma'am! However, I determined that our commander was in mortal danger!"

"Did the Fourth Army send any signals asking for your assistance?"

"No, ma'am! But I must protect you to my last breath! The *généralissime* is vital to the Empire."

Altina fell silent once again, prompting Regis to take over. "Why did you so suddenly barge through the Fourth Army's rear guard?" he asked. "There should have been better ways to announce your presence as an allied force."

Rockhoward gave Regis a look as though he were regarding a complete fool. "Well, because I need to be by the *généralissime*'s side as soon as physically possible, of course!"

"As a result of your actions, the Etruscan Army, which was on the verge of surrender, has instead made an orderly retreat."

"Indeed. The moment my army joined the fray, they must have realized that they had no chance of victory! Thus, they decided to retreat. I am surprised this seems strange to you."

"What are you talking about? Our victory was already assured. The enemy only escaped us because our encirclement was disrupted from behind."

“Does it matter?” Rockhoward replied in a remonstrative tone. “We won.”

“That’s not what I…” Regis trailed off, stunned. “Just how many lives do you think we lost forming that encirclement?”

“Bah hah hah! You fixate on the strangest things, Tactician. Oh, I see! You must think that I’ve made off with your glory!”

“What glory is there in your dereliction of duty?!”

“I adapted to the situation!” Rockhoward declared with a self-satisfied shrug. As far as he was concerned, Regis was craving recognition and coming out with all manner of excuses and false allegations to that end.

All of a sudden, Altina thrust her treasured sword into the ground and pulled up her legs like a coiled spring. The surrounding troops wondered what was about to happen, and as so much attention gathered upon the princess, she leaped from the back of her trusty steed and flew through the air like a magnificent eagle.

“You imbecile!”

Altina landed a flying kick on Rockhoward, who was thrown from his horse with an awkward, “Gwah?!” He struck the ground with a resounding *thud*, and the nearby soldiers immediately took a step back. They cried out in confusion as they formed a ring around the spectacle.

Altina towered over the lieutenant general sprawled on the ground, her eyes brimming with an unmistakable rage. “Your breach of orders completely ruined our impending victory!” she snapped. “And to make matters worse, you’ve made no attempt to even recognize your failure! You’re as self-centered as you are incompetent. You have no right to lead one of our nation’s armies!”

“Urgh... My face... You kicked me in the face!” Rockhoward shouted. His voice quavered, and he was holding his nose. “Even if you are royalty, this is unforgivable! Unreasonable! I’m the head of a marquis house!”

“Not my problem!” Altina retorted, even louder. “As the *généralissime*, I dismiss you from your position as commander of the Eighth Army!”

“What?! Very well, then! Have it your way! Most of the Eighth Army is made up of my own personal soldiers, so I’ll take them all with me!”

“Just get lost already!”

And with that, the shouting match was over. Regis could feel the flood of emotions slowly draining from his body, perhaps because the princess had so aptly voiced what was gnawing away at him. “It seems we have settled upon the dismissal of the commander and the dismantlement of the Eighth Army,” he said as he likewise stood over Rockhoward. “However, before that, I will need you to settle a matter of responsibility.”

“Silence!” Rockhoward barked. “A mere chevalier shall not speak to a marquis without permission!”

“This is a military matter; I address you not as a chevalier, but as the strategist of the *généralissime*’s council. I urge you, the commander of the Eighth Army, to carry out your final duty.”

“What duty?”

“Surely a lieutenant general must be aware that a serious dereliction of duty can be met with execution.”

Rockhoward paled at those words. “S-Such nonsense...” he sputtered. “I am a marquis. A marquis of the west, even! A member of the third faction! I’m on the princess’s side!”

“Is that so?” Altina asked. “I don’t remember ever receiving any support from House Rockhoward.”

“That’s, well... That’s because I, the head of the house, was out on the battlefield. I was rooting for you emotionally! You will see support henceforth.”

“It’s too late now!” Altina said as she drew her sword from the dirt. Its blade sliced through the earth and seemingly even the wind itself.

“Wait! *Généralissime!* Please!” Rockhoward pleaded. “I really was thinking of nothing but your safety!”

Regis shook his head. “You were thinking of a way to gain more recognition.”

“Well, isn’t that true for everyone?!”

“Not once in my life have I wished to be recognized.”

Regis felt no sympathy for the man who had made light of so many lives for his own selfish desires—who failed to understand the error of his ways even now. Some saw ignorance as an unchangeable facet of one’s personality, but just as a soldier who neglected training would fall on the battlefield, or a farmer who neglected farmwork would welcome a meager harvest, a commander who neglected to learn needed to be punished. It was not something that could simply be forgiven due to the offender’s standing.

Altina thrust out her sword. “Rockhoward!” she roared.

“Eek!” Rockhoward shrieked as the blade grazed the tip of his nose.

“Because of your greed, we have lost a victory that so many men staked their lives on. Take responsibility for what you have cost us.”

“Hh... Ghh... Grr...”

His face turned blue, then red. Blood trickled down his nose while sweat beaded on his forehead. And then, from among the ranks of soldiers forming a ring around them...a single man emerged.

“Pardon me,” the man said, his thick lips curled into an affable smile. It was Inspector Frank Ignatius de Duran.

“Do you need something?” Altina asked, her eyes and sword unmoving.

Frank shrugged. “I understand that this may be forward, but could you leave his punishment to me? This is part of my work.”

“How does an unemployed man intend to deal with him? In case you’ve forgotten, the Ministry is no more.”

“Truth be told, that’s not entirely the case. My mission this time was to secretly investigate Sir Rockhoward. I’ve now confirmed a grievous breach of orders that can’t be overlooked.”

“Your mission... You’ve already got another job, then?”

Frank produced an epaulet from his pocket. “I’ve been accepted into the new national gendarmerie,” he said. “We’re officials who crack down on injustices committed against the people, even those by high-ranking members of the military. For a long while, the organization was but a shadow of its former self, but Emperor Latrielle has revived it.”

“The gendarmerie...?” Altina asked quizzically.

Regis knew the organization existed, but he hadn’t heard anything about it being reorganized. “I was led to believe it was an organization to keep watch over high-ranking military officials and nobles,” he said.

“That’s a misunderstanding—we don’t discriminate whatsoever,” Frank replied. “Although, given their greater influence over the

nation, we do have a tendency to prioritize those with greater authority.” He knowingly closed one eye.

“So, what’s going to happen to Sir Rockhoward...?”

“He’s going to be apprehended and confined to the capital. His crimes will be investigated, and I presume he will need to pay a large sum of reparations to the state and the *généralissime*.”

“That sounds about right...”

In other words, the issue was going to be resolved financially. It was inevitable; Belgaria was purposefully easy on its nobles, even in criminal matters. Incarcerating a prominent noble was rather pointless in the long run, so money was demanded from them instead.

Noticing that Altina looked wholly unsatisfied with this outcome, Frank attempted to calm her. “I’ll explain the situation to the Eighth Army’s officers on my end. He’s still their commander, despite everything—they’re more likely to listen to me than to a *généralissime* who kicked him in the face. I’ll do my best to make sure they’re content.”

“If they’re loyal enough to Rockhoward to get annoyed at me, they should channel that loyalty into reining in his foolishness,” Altina replied. She made quite a reasonable point.

“Please do,” Regis said to the inspector, very much on board with the proposal. “We’ll accept anyone who wants to transfer to the Fourth Army, but...I wouldn’t want to force people to obey us.”

Making subordinates of those who were still siding with Rockhoward was a recipe for disaster. Altina seemed to understand this, as she tucked away her sword. “I’ll put my support behind whatever Regis thinks is best,” she said.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” Frank replied, courteously bowing his head. “The rest will be left to the gendarmerie, then.”

A number of soldiers bearing the same insignia on their shoulders stepped out from the ring of spectators and brought Rockhoward to his feet.

“Careful,” Frank warned the lieutenant general. “Resist and you’ll be tried for treason.”

“Erk... Unhand me!” Rockhoward protested. “I can w-walk on my own!” He shot Regis a fierce glare as he was led away, but he received no response. The tactician was already well accustomed to having prominent nobles despise him, so he was too busy considering his next course of action.

The other one won't be so easy...

✧ ✧ ✧

Now that relations with the Eighth Army had broken down, Regis could no longer leave them to defend the base. The Fourth Army returned to Aloe-Marroe before word of the outside happenings spread, and the officers serving under Rockhoward were gathered in the courtyard where Frank explained the situation.

Frank worried the men would grow enraged or even lash out upon hearing that their lord was apprehended...but his fears were surprisingly unfounded. As the circumstances were explained, they sighed and placed their heads in their hands. Those from House Rockhoward seemed particularly affected.

“I always thought our house’s head would do something one of these days...” one of the men said.

“Has he always been like that?” Frank asked.

The man nodded. “How should I put this...? Once his mind is set on something, he tends to forget about everything else.”

To put it nicely, Rockhoward was an abnormally focused individual—one whom Frank considered unsuited to being a commander.

“The Eighth Army is disbanded, and House Rockhoward will need to pay a hefty fee,” Frank explained. “There’s no law restricting a noble from keeping an army, but I predict that he’s going to struggle to maintain his current forces.”

“What’s going to happen to us...?”

“I’m just a gendarme; I can’t say much on the matter.”

Frank’s division was under the direct control of the emperor, which meant he sided with the First Army. The problem was, the First Army was an elite unit, while the Eighth Army’s soldiers were not reported to be particularly strong. It was doubtful that the First Army would take them in, especially considering the problems they had caused.

Perhaps their careers would have been more secure if the Ministry were still around, but the First Army had taken over its duties.

Corruption had decreased sharply as a result, but now there were far fewer people to work with and much that still needed to be ironed out. There was a high chance that the remaining soldiers would end up neglected for the time being.

The officers started exchanging distressed glances. “S-Seriously...?” one muttered.

“I can’t stand this!” another spat. “We’ve been serving since my grandpa’s time, but our strategies, equipment, and training—they’re all outdated. We never achieve anything of note! And on top of that, now we’ve got a dishonorable breach of orders to deal with!”

A third man paused for a moment in thought. “Actually... I remember hearing that the Fourth Army doesn’t have enough imperial soldiers,” he said. Those words seemed to trigger something in the gathered officers, as they suddenly began spewing all the information they knew.

“Yeah, that must be why they summoned all those mercenaries the other day!”

“They’re not even ten thousand strong, are they?”

“No, but I’ve heard they’ve got divisions in the north and east...”

“Still, there aren’t enough soldiers under the *généralissime*’s direct control, right?”

“That feeble tactician did say something about needing more troops...”

“All right. Let’s go haggle with him!”

Rockhoward must have been a less popular commander than expected; rather than lamenting his fate, the men began herding out of the courtyard without so much as a word of concern for him. Most would presumably transfer to the Fourth Army. Once the vast majority were gone, only a handful of old men remained.

“What about you, gentlemen?” Frank asked.

“Who knows?” one replied, seeming to speak for the others as well.

“I’m not at an age to be chasing promotions and glory. I’m going to make my way home, but on the off chance that His Majesty ever chooses to forgive our lord...a part of me still wants to support him.”

“I respect the depths of your devotion.”

“I...must repay my debt to his predecessor.”

“I know I’m not one to speak, but...knights these days tend to value personal gain over honor. The way I see it, men like you are the only ones who deserve the title.”

The man shook his head. “I’m too old to find a new lord to serve, is all. Gendarme, House Rockhoward is a noble lineage that supported *L’Empereur Flamme* himself. Although the current generation is a

simpleton, he has no rebellious intent. I beg of you—please be lenient with him.”

At this, the old men all sadly bowed their heads.

Frank could only shy away from the show of melancholy. “I’ll...pass your words on to His Majesty,” he said.

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Meanwhile, only two men were present in the great conference room that could have seated dozens. One was Regis; the other was Lieutenant General Dorvale, commander of the Sixth Army. Altina was nowhere to be seen, and neither man had any guards with them. Regis had asked for a private conversation, and the lieutenant general no doubt wanted to air his grievances about the previous engagement.

“Go on, then! Explain what all of that was!” Dorvale exclaimed, looking like indignation personified. Regis decided to take up the challenge.

“We managed to fight back the Etruscan Army with the assistance of the Sixth Army, although our encirclement was breached due to the Eighth Army’s overeagerness.”

“I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about the Eighth Army! I was never informed that you planned to use my army as a shield!”

“We did nothing of the sort. It is quite common for one’s ranks to fall apart when faced with an enemy charge. That’s precisely why we have a rear guard.”

“It is *not* common for a force of eight thousand to split cleanly down the center! They had clearly rehearsed for this!”

“Rehearsed or not, it was on the decision of the *généralissime*. There is no reason to rebuke soldiers on the battlefield for standing and facing the enemy head-on,” Regis said. Of course, he had been the

one to propose the plan, not Altina, but he saw no reason to reveal that.

Dorvale's frustrations were far from quelled. "There is nothing I can say if our commander gave the order—that much is true. But do you think you can earn the trust of your soldiers with such heartless commands?!"

"Ah. So this is about trust, then?" Had the princess been there, perhaps she would have taken Dorvale's side on the matter. This was a personal discussion, however, so she had no reason to be in attendance.

"You're much too young!" Dorvale fervently went on. "The plan was splendid, I can admit that, but you cannot expect to command when you jeopardize the trust of your soldiers!"

"I shall make sure to remember that. Incidentally, on the topic of trust... What say you?"

"I don't take your meaning."

"Seeing the Sixth Army clash with Etruria's forces removed all doubt—had your men taken on just as many Etruscans, they would very easily have won."

"Hah... Ah hah hah!" Dorvale's shoulders trembled as he laughed. "I was wondering what you were going to say. The outcome can be but a matter of chance."

"Before this battle, there were several other engagements. During each one, the Sixth Army was thoroughly driven back without losing any troops. I can only think you conceded victory to the enemy," Regis said with certainty.

Dorvale shook his head. "You were not there then; I cannot expect you to understand. The condition of our men, the force of the

enemy... The situation differed greatly from what you observed today.”

“So you claim you did not intentionally retreat?”

“Naturally! For what reason would I do such a thing? I have nothing to gain from intentionally losing to Etruria!”

“As a result, Sembione and seven other forts have fallen into enemy hands,” Regis said.

“And the Sixth Army will participate in the battle to reclaim them. I would never lose deliberately. All the praise has gotten to your head, Tactician! On my honor, I won’t permit these baseless accusations!”

Dorvale prattled on with an unmistakable intensity. Once upon a time, Regis would have been too afraid to respond, but now... To put it bluntly, this was nothing compared to being on the battlefield where the lives of ten thousand men were in his hands. He was as weak as a puppy, but he had endured the murderous intent of the Black Knight Jerome, Mercenary King Gilbert, and even Emperor Latrielle firsthand.

No matter how Dorvale might threaten me, he just seems...underwhelming by comparison.

Regis did not even break into a sweat as he asked, “Where did you put the rations that were supposed to be at those forts?”

Dorvale smirked. “Do you really need to ask? It is regrettable, but they’re in Etruscan hands now. Are you requesting reparations for them? My army protected the civilians. You’re not going to tell me that their lives are less important than some sacks of grain, are you?”

“You may think that an appropriate response, but you’re changing the subject. If you want to compare lives and grain, we can have that conversation later. For now, I think you should answer my question.”

“It *was* an appropriate response!”

“I’ll ask again—where are the rations?”

“With the Etruscans! Weren’t you listening?!”

“You say that, but an Etruscan officer we took captive claims that the storehouses of each fortress they captured were empty.”

“Hah! So, you’re interrogating me based on the nonsense of a foreign soldier?! You’re really trying my patience!”

“The princess has the backing of the Tirasio Laverdes, an astute household who rally the up-and-coming nobles of the south. After serving so long in the southern region, I assume you are aware of them, Lieutenant General Dorvale.”

“I’ve at least met them before.”

“Are you aware that they manage the Empire’s southern merchants?”

“Hmm? Well... No. I’ve heard they were wealthy merchants, but I didn’t realize they were that important. Still, what does that have to do with these rations?” Dorvale asked. He looked thoroughly done with the conversation.

Regis gazed across the plains outside the window. The earth was on the verge of turning madder red in the setting sun. “A fortress fell to the Etruscan Army, and their invasion was permitted to continue,” he said. “As the Empire’s agricultural region continues to be taken, the cost of wheat and vegetables has risen dramatically. I hear that Hispaniard pirates are also laying waste to the seas.”

“Weren’t we going to talk about rations?!”

Regis locked eyes with Dorvale. “Well, I’m sure the value of those rations shot up as well.”

“You got any evidence, kid?” the lieutenant general responded. His expression looked as twisted as the devil in a church fresco, his voice as dark and menacing as the depths of the underworld.

Of course, Regis had not stepped into this snake's den unprepared. "This is a list of all the merchants who deal with the Sixth Army," he said, producing a sheet of parchment. "I've placed a mark by the ones who purportedly deal in spirits and clothes outside of normal circulation. Do they ring any bells, Lieutenant General Dorvale?"

Dorvale responded with a low growl. His lip trembled.

"Emperor Latrielle has apparently reestablished the national gendarmerie," Regis continued. "Were you aware? Perhaps I could have them investigate the books of a few peculiar merchants. Now, let me ask you again—what happened to the rations of those forts?"

"Gh... You... You damn brat!"

Dorvale's hand went to the sword at his waist, but Regis merely narrowed his eyes in response. "So you admit it, then?"

The lieutenant general gave a deep sigh. "I never thought you would actually piece it all together. I suppose this was to be expected."

"Mm. How unfortunate."

"Yes, how truly unfortunate. Our nation will surely mourn the loss of such a great hero."

"Wait. Lieutenant General?!"

"I'll toss your worthless body in the lake, alongside that blasted document!"

Regis backed away with a yelp as Dorvale drew his blade. He had confronted many imposing people and grown accustomed to their intimidation and malice, but that did not make him any less useless when it came to battle. Even swinging around a practice sword was still too much for him to manage.

I'm... I'm going to die.

"Regis!"

The door to the conference room burst open with a rending cry. The hefty wood had shattered under the force of Altina's *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, and through the eruption of splinters raced a dark shadow.

"Dorvale!" Eddie shouted as he closed the distance between himself and the lieutenant general, the *Défendre Sept* ready in his hand.

"Fool. Have you no honor?!" Dorvale cried. He swung down his sword...and could only watch as it shattered into pieces.



Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac had developed and mastered a technique to effectively disarm his opponents. One stroke was enough to destroy Dorvale's blade.

The lieutenant general stood stock-still, his hand quivering from the impact. "Grr... To think you were so skilled all along..."

"I'm the head of House Balzac, in case you've forgotten."

"Bastard!" Dorvale snapped, his eyes wide open. "You never achieved anything under me!"

"Haven't I told you already? I can't stand the sight of blood."

Dorvale dropped to his knees, still gripping the sorry remains of his weapon. "Wh-What did I do wrong...?" he muttered in a stupor. "I sold a few measly rations. All those nobles out on the front lines... They all do the same..."

Regis let out a deep breath. "That was...surprising."

"Hey, that should be my line," Eddie said with a wry smile. "Can't have you dying over something like this, Regis."

Altina walked over, her sword slung across her shoulder. "My thoughts exactly! You told me to wait outside, so I decided to leave things to you. Look where that got you!"

"Well, I never imagined that he would suddenly attack me..." Regis muttered.

"Naive!" Altina barked. "Way too naive!"

"You think so?"

Eddie was just as admonishing. "Doesn't matter whether they're bandits or nobles—you can expect criminals to act pretty much the same," he said.

“I’ll make sure to be more careful next time,” Regis replied. He looked at Dorvale. “I wanted the lieutenant general to repent his actions. I wanted to settle the matter before it became a big deal.”

Altina sighed. “To think I’d need to say this twice in one day...”

Dorvale groaned and drooped his head; there was no way for him to avoid what was coming next.

“As *généralissime*, I dismiss you from your position as commander of the Sixth Army!”

The ruckus caused several of the soldiers on patrol to race over.

“What? The door?!” one of them exclaimed. “What happened?!”

Altina was about to explain, but Regis raised a hand to stop her. “An intruder,” he said. “Presumably from the Etruscan Army. They might have infiltrated the city, so bolster our security. Lieutenant General Dorvale was injured.”

“Heavens!”

This was a lie, of course—there was no intruder and nobody was injured. The soldiers were none the wiser, so they hurried off to inform the others. There would no doubt be more patrols around the fortress going forward.

Next, Regis turned to Eddie. “Secure Lord Dorvale in a room at once. Please watch over him for a while, and don’t let anyone in.”

“Got it,” Eddie replied with a nod. “Get someone to come replace me as soon as you can, though. I’m not looking forward to spending time alone with this guy.”

“Understood.”

In the end, only Regis and Altina remained in the conference room.

“You’re not injured, are you?” the princess asked. “Be honest with me.”

“I’m fine.”

Altina paused for a moment before she spoke again. “Hey, um... Why didn’t you turn Dorvale in to the gendarmerie?”

“Because he isn’t the one behind it all.”

“Huh?!”

“Lord Dorvale is a noble from the central region; he wouldn’t have an easy time finding a merchant willing to accept stolen military supplies.”

“Ah. True...”

“I’m wondering whether the merchant came to him with the idea. I suppose it wouldn’t matter either way, though—we can’t let someone run free after purchasing what belongs to the imperial army.”

“Yeah. They had to have known what they were doing.”

“That’s why I don’t want Dorvale’s capture to be made public. Not until we’ve investigated the merchants,” Regis said, albeit with a conflicted expression. He had arranged to meet with Dorvale alone so that the matter could be settled in secret...but never had he expected to be so suddenly attacked. Humans were surprisingly hasty. They were imprudent. Greedy. They did not move like pieces on a chessboard.

Altina placed a hand on her hip. “There’s no way around it, then! There’s loads for us to do, but let’s do our best, Regis!”

The princess’s bottomless cheer and optimism were incomprehensible to Regis. She was precious, wonderful, and all-around dazzling. She had the strength to keep pushing forward regardless of whatever adversity she faced.

“Thank you,” Regis muttered.

“Ah hah hah! Don’t you worry about it. I’ll protect you, Regis! That’s the decision I’ve come to!”

“I’m not sure that’s entirely appropriate, what with you being my commander and me your subordinate.”

“It can’t be helped. You’re pretty weak, you know!”

“I...won’t deny that. But—”

“The question is, what should we do from here?!”

They would need to investigate the merchants suspected of conducting illegal dealings with the Sixth Army—preferably all of them at once, in case word spread and they began to hide evidence. They would also need to trace the movements of a fleeing Etruscan Army, which had presumably retreated back to Sembione.

We might have another siege on our hands.

And worse still, Latrielle’s ambitions were by no means limited to national defense. “Next, we will probably be set to invade,” Regis said.

Altina tightly pursed her lips.

Final Chapter: The Port on the Southwest Sea

October 9th—

A warm breeze blew in from the southern sea and across Tarnoritz, a port city in the southwest reaches of the Empire. It was constructed over the largest harbor in the south, and there were several massive sailing ships moored at its docks. The clatter of wooden hammers echoed out from a great shipyard.

Far more ships were unloading their cargo at Tarnoritz than ever before, owing to the western port of Ciennbourg being in the midst of an extensive reconstruction. A great many people hoisted jute bags and wooden crates, vigorously carrying them to and from the holds of vast ships.

Tarnoritz was a lively city—rats raced along the streets, cats chased after them, and curious children followed along behind. It was also the principal residence of House Tiraso Laverde.

In place of a hefty estate for the city's lord was a massive trading firm, so grand that all those who passed through it had to take at least a glance at its broad selection. Its goods ranged from daily necessities to accessories and fine art. Lately, herbal medicines from the far east had grown increasingly popular.

Three streets down from this bustling enterprise, Regis was being herded into a brick reception hall. It was a peculiar building—a mix of elements from Belgaria, its neighbors...and even nations across the distant sea. The doors and pillars were Hispanian in design, while the fine ceramic pots, wood carvings, and hanging scrolls seemed to come from various eastern nations. It was almost like a museum. The most Regis could muster was an astounded, “Extraordinary...”

“Aha ha!” Altina chuckled. “This is kinda fun!”

Behind them, Elize walked with a serious expression. A servant guided the trio to the farthest room on the third floor, where the new head of the ducal household, Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasol Laverde, awaited them.

Elenore smiled. "Well met, Princess."

"Feels like it was just yesterday," Altina replied. Both women were bold in their own right, so they greeted one another as though they were old friends.

Elenore shot Regis a glance. "And you too, of course."

"Thank you for the invitation," Regis said. "This is a marvelous manor."

"Oho ho... You like it?"

"I do."

"It could all be yours. You need only say the word."

"N-No... That's much too—"

"Or you could take my little sister Renoir, if you'd prefer."

"I wouldn't dare."

"We have over ten thousand foreign books in the basement."

Regis had to pause and think about that one. Only when Altina yelled, "Hey, Regis?!" was he able to regain his composure.

"*Ahem.*" Regis cleared his throat. "I have an objective and my own duties to attend to, I'm afraid." He had said something quite similar before, yet Altina was now staring at him for some reason.

Elenore gave a bitter smile. "All teasing aside, I could never be so brazen. Take whatever books you want back with you. You've graced me with something so lucrative that I would gladly allow you an entire boatload."

“Huh?! You’ve settled that matter already?!”

“Haggling with the upper crust is a specialty of mine. I told you that, didn’t I?”

“Still... That was fast.”

“Well, hesitation was not an option, else someone else would have snatched away my opportunity. I did need to make a few concessions; I paid a sizable amount to another noble interested in the rights to these new guns and settled things with the blacksmiths’ union by setting up an annual payment for ‘engineering guidance,’ if you can even call it that.”

“I see... You were liberal with your spending to settle things quickly. How bold of you.”

“You can negotiate on such a level too, can’t you, Regis?”

“Oh, no... Negotiation isn’t my strong suit.”

Regis held some lingering regrets. If only he had approached the situation in Aloe-Marroe with better foresight—perhaps then he wouldn’t have lost the Sixth and Eighth Armies. Still, there was no point in him lamenting his failure; a month had already passed since then.

The Sixth Army had been dismantled, and its soldiers had mostly returned to the capital. There, they would face little repercussion for what had happened. They were close with prominent nobles and presumably had plenty of career options open to them.

Meanwhile, investigators had managed to pin down the majority of the merchants receiving embezzled goods from Dorvale—or so Regis was told through reports. He was not directly involved in the matter. The gendarmerie had worked with a portion of the Fourth Army to storm seven firms in three cities, all at once. As it turned out, not

only were the suspected merchants dealing in unlawful goods, but they were also involved in tax evasion. They were all apprehended.

Unfortunately, some had already fled the Empire and were now beyond the reach of the law. Dorvale was confined in the capital and awaiting his judgment.

As punishment for his breach of conduct, Rockhoward of the Eighth Army had been forced to pay reparations of such an astounding amount that he could no longer hold an army. He had even needed to sell his estate.

Surprisingly enough, most of the men serving under Rockhoward had voiced their desire to transfer to the Fourth Army. Regis had accepted them all. They were, it seemed, much less loyal to their disgraced commander than he had assumed.

Soon after, the former soldiers of the Eighth Army had performed fiercely in the liberation of Etruscan-occupied Sempione. The battle had panned out just as they had anticipated prior to the war—during the siege, Belgaria’s latest firearms and artillery demonstrated their might and allowed them to secure an overwhelming advantage. Etruria’s weapons had a vastly inferior range, so for as long as they refused to leave their base, they were victim to a one-sided bombardment.

Now, the Fourth Army was twenty thousand strong.

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“Thank you for all the assistance you’ve afforded me,” Elize said with a courteous bow. “Truly.”

“Spare me your words of gratitude,” Elenore replied. “I shall receive your thanks in material goods one of these days. I expect good returns.”

“Certainly...”

“Now, as long as you don’t forget that...feel free to strive toward your ideals.”

Elize bowed even deeper. “I will give it my utmost.”



“A new notice arrived from my relatives in High Britannia,” Elenore said, taking out a letter.

“Has something happened...?”

Elenore held out the paper. “It would be easier for you to read it yourself.”

“Pardon me!” Elize took the letter in quivering hands and immediately began devouring its contents. As Regis and Altina did not know the circumstances, Elenore provided an explanation.

“House Tirasio Laverde has a branch family in High Britannia,” she said. “The business there is run by a fine woman named Marlborough.”

“Oh, I see...” Regis muttered. “It’s easier to work so closely with relatives.”

“I cannot say I trust them all that much. They *are* my largest business rivals,” Elenore said with a chuckle. She then returned to the focus of the letter. “High Britannia’s parliament has voted to dethrone Queen Margaret.”

“What?!” Altina exclaimed, her eyes wide.

So, they went forward with it after all... Regis thought.

Latrielle fully intended to invade High Britannia, but he needed just cause. That was why he had presumably demanded reparations that the nation was incapable of accepting. Instead, those governing High Britannia intended to push all accountability for the war onto Margaret.

“Parliament apparently intends to welcome Elizabeth Victoria as the new queen,” Elenore continued. “This has not yet been announced officially, and for two reasons. The first is that Margaret is in Belgian custody, and negotiations are still underway. High

Britannia wishes to form a peace treaty—not because of any particular change of opinion, but because they fear what might happen when the Empire strikes back. And as for the second... Elizabeth is presently unaccounted for. How can they enthrone a new queen when she is nowhere to be found?”

Elenore turned to look at Elize, prompting Regis and Altina to do the same. Elize was still reading the letter. It was written in Belgarian, so it took her a little longer than she had wanted.

“Am I...too late, once again?” she asked weakly.

“Fret not,” Elenore replied. “You were right to leave that chaotic land. Had you been caught by Margaret’s faction or the anti-monarchists, you would not even be alive right now.”

“Urk...” Elize swallowed.

“Will you be able to send a ship to High Britannia?” Regis asked.

“We are still at war from a diplomatic standpoint, so direct contact has been severed,” Elenore explained. “Our routes through a third party have recovered, though.”

“Would that third party happen to be Hispania?”

“They are our fastest route.”

“The faster, the better.”

Elenore met this response with narrowed eyes. “So, the next target is Hispania?” she asked, having discerned the tactician’s meaning.

“So it seems.”

“A most troublesome nation, but a crucial trade partner. Does His Majesty not understand this?”

“I think he does,” Regis replied. Latrielle simply did not share the same sense of values; he believed that conquering alone was the solution to their problems.

“Not that I want to invade anyone!” Altina interjected, her lips pursed into a disgruntled pout.

“Defying the emperor’s edict would make us traitors,” Regis noted, trying to pacify the princess. Her determined nature meant this was something of a familiar exchange between them, but there was little else they could do.

“And we’re not ready for that. I know.”

“As we are now, we don’t stand a chance against the First Army,” Regis explained. “We aim for peace with the surrounding nations, but that is because we aim to better the lives of the oppressed people. For that, we must do away with war and class division. We must not confuse our means with our ends, though. Our intention is not to topple the current regime, nor are nobles our enemies. Acting on our emotions will save no one.”

“How many times have we had this discussion now? I’m not going to blow a fuse just because I’ve been issued an order that contradicts my ideals.”

“I trust that you won’t.”

“So I wasn’t imagining it...” Elize said anxiously. “The two of you really do intend to rebel against Emperor Latrielle, don’t you?”

“Naturally!” Altina exclaimed with a vigorous nod, her fists clenched tightly.

“Please keep it a secret,” Regis added, scratching his head.

“O-Of course!” Elize stammered. “I won’t say a word!”

“The path that His Majesty has taken leads to a destination far from our own,” Regis said. “To make matters worse, his current policies will eventually lead to catastrophic failure. The Empire might soon come apart at the seams if we aren’t adequately prepared.”

Elize nodded meekly. “Does that have anything to do with...what we talked about?” she asked. It was clear that she had sharp intuition.

“It does,” Regis said plainly. “Truth be told, I have a request for you.”

“I’ll do whatever I can, so long as it’s not to the detriment of High Britannia.”

“I...can’t say for sure. It’s hard to determine what will prove good or bad for our neighbors. If you would rather Belgaria wither away, this request might not be so enticing after all. But what if you could do something that would prevent a war between our nations—that would spare the lives of tens of thousands of people?”

“I would act in an instant.”

“That’s good to hear. We can work together, then.”

“So, what’s the request...?”

Regis produced a sheet of parchment from the bag slung across his shoulder and then spread it over the table—with Elenore’s permission, of course. It was a blueprint of some kind, containing diagrams of a peculiar object from the top, bottom, and side. Exact measurements were provided for each and every small segment. Regis had even brought with him one of the finished products, which he held out on his palm.

“I’m sure you’re aware, but this is the metal casing of a bullet. This one in particular happens to be for the Fusil 851,” Regis said. He had just divulged a secret of the utmost importance—one that would soon have a lasting impact on the nation...and yet, the three women did not react in the slightest.

Regis had already told Altina about the bullet, so she had nothing more to say on the matter. Elize and Elenore, meanwhile, were a tad unfamiliar with matters pertaining to the military. Their expressions made it clear that they were lost on a more fundamental level. Had it

been Latrielle bearing witness to this casing, he would no doubt have kicked back his chair and jumped to his feet in shock—not that Regis had any intention of showing him.

Somewhat disappointed that the women did not share his enthusiasm, Regis began to explain. “By using metal cartridges, the Fusil 851 can become more precise and reliable than any existing model. Reload times will decrease, which will in turn allow for a much greater output. In short, it will allow us to gain an overwhelming advantage.”

“I see. I see.” Elize nodded along. “That sounds quite amazing.”

Regis paused for a moment in thought, realizing there were a few details he had yet to explain. He decided to settle on a brief summary...

...and thirty minutes later, he had just about covered the basics. Elize now understood perhaps half of what he had covered—at least, he hoped she did. Her brows were knitted into a concentrated frown and she wore a strained expression.

“So in short,” Elize began, “paper cartridges are the main flaw of the Empire’s current firearms, and there is a huge advantage in using metal ones.”

Regis nodded. “Correct.”

“But these metal cartridges cannot yet be manufactured in Belgaria.”

“Not for another few years.” High-precision presses only existed within High Britannia, although the other nations would catch up soon enough.

Elize stared at the thin metal cylinder in Regis’s hand. “Then, if you can mass-produce that...”

“It will mean two things from a strategic standpoint. First, as I said earlier, the performance of our firearms will improve drastically.

Metal casing will increase the power of the Belgarian military without us having to hire any more soldiers. Second, it will eliminate the supply problem. Emperor Latrielle intends to prevent rebellion by restricting the circulation of ammunition.”

This was how guns differed from the swords and spears that had ruled the Empire for so many generations. Ammunition was being mass-produced near the capital. Altina’s forces would receive replenishments while they were pitted against enemy armies, but those provisions would naturally cease once they turned coat.

“So you intend to receive them through High Britannia’s sea routes?” Elize asked.

“If our situation comes to that.”

“You can’t start making them somewhere in the south?”

“Well, we don’t have the necessary forging presses.” Regis held up the casing in his hand. “A piece like this can be made with enough time and effort, but we’re going to need tens of thousands of them if civil war breaks out.”

“That many?!”

Most importantly, making the shells within the country carried a greater risk of the operation being discovered. They needed to avoid leaving any evidence of their rebellious intent before they were prepared to act upon it.

Regis produced another diagram. “Of course, we can’t just insert a metal cartridge into a Fusil 851 and expect it to work,” he said. “This chamber piece will need to be refashioned as well.”

“For what reason?” Elize asked.

“Paper cartridges burn up on discharge. Metal ones, on the other hand, expand from the explosive pressure and stick to the chamber.

We'll need a mechanism of some sort to eject them, since the breech is too hot to touch after the gun is fired."

"Wait... Aren't paper cartridges better, then?"

"The paper burns up, but it still remains in the chamber as ash. This can lead to a malfunction, and trying to clean it out is much more troublesome than expelling a metal casing."

"I see."

Incidentally, brass was being used to make the shells. It was more resistant to corrosion than iron, more readily available, and easier to cold form. Perhaps the biggest inconvenience was that brass shells would expand and end up stuck in the chamber, but brass was quick to cool, which made them easier to expel.

In addition to everything else, High Britannia had seen great developments in its brass-processing technology. In Belgaria, the metal was used mostly for ornamentation.

"If you will cooperate, Ms. Elize, then we will send engineers of the Fourth Army to accompany you," Regis said. "They will ensure your safety."

"Very well," Elize replied. "I would much rather support a peaceful neighbor than a callous conqueror. I promise my cooperation."

Regis lowered his head, while Altina held out her right hand. "Thank you, Elize. Or should I call you by your real name now?" she asked.

"I've not yet come far enough for that. In fact, I haven't even taken my first steps. One day, when we are of equal standing, I would like to introduce myself again."

"I'll be waiting!"

"I won't let you down," Elize said as she firmly grasped Altina's hand. These girls weren't rulers, nor were they anywhere close to reaching their goals...but if they continued to forge such valuable bonds,

perhaps they would attain their goals someday. Regis could feel a pleasant warmth in his chest as he witnessed their camaraderie.

Content that their discussion had reached its conclusion, Elenore stood. “We depart in three days, then. Anyone who wants aboard can stay at my mansion. I will not forbid you from going out until then...but do take care; there are more than enough High Britanniains in this city.”

“You have my thanks,” Elize said. “I can’t even count my debts to you...”

“I am a merchant, and doing business is much easier during times of peace than war. As long as you are helping our princess, that’s enough for me.”

“I thought that merchants—especially those dealing in arms—longed for war above all else. Many were incited in my homeland.”

“Hmph... Such people haven’t the faintest clue about running a business. Since when do the dead buy wares?”

Elize nodded in response and then gazed outside the window. The seas were vast, but she would need to cross them to reach High Britannia. That was where she belonged...but it was also where her true battle would begin.

A new battle was unfolding for Altina as well.

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November 3rd—

Word on the wind said it was snowing in the capital up north. Down in the south, however, it was just a little more bearable than the summer months.

An express messenger carried the emperor’s direct order to Sembione. The city had been temporarily occupied during the

Etruscan invasion, but once liberated, it became the temporary base of the Fourth Army. Its walls and portions of the town bore the scars of cannon fire.

The fortress overlooking the city was constructed in the Belgian style, with a great hall at its center. This was, apparently, where the parties of nobles had once been held every night. It was now being used as a place for the commander to convey orders or welcome envoys. The interior was still quite gaudy, but the art that had once decorated its walls was gone, either taken by the Etruscan Army or destroyed. Or perhaps Dorvale had sold them along with the rations—that was still up for investigation.

The messenger from the capital presented a letter, which Abidal-Evra took, inspected, and then offered to Altina with a polite, “Your Highness.”

“All yours, Regis.”

Abidal-Evra proffered the letter to Regis this time with a respectful, “Tactician.” Regis did not believe this was how an edict from the emperor should be handled, but he accepted it nonetheless.

“So be it.”

Regis confirmed the emperor’s seal on the envelope; then he broke the wax and scanned through the parchment.

“So?” Altina prompted. Her elbow was planted into her armrest and she was resting her cheek on her hand. “Is it safe to show me?”

“I will keep hold of this for now,” Regis replied. It would be quite a major incident for the emperor’s blood relative to tear apart a letter right in front of the emperor’s messenger...and the details would surely compel her to.

Regis decided to relay its contents. As well as Altina and Abidal-Evra, Eddie, Eric, and the other officers were present as well. He spoke so that all could hear him.

“Etruria has surrendered.”

The officers were immediately astir, but after remembering that they were before their commander, they quickly contained themselves.

Altina narrowed her eyes. “Surrendered, you say?”

“Indeed,” Regis replied. “The enemy’s primary force of thirty thousand was annihilated while defending Sembione, and with our most recent batch of reinforcements, the Empire has sixty thousand men stationed in the south.”

The core of this unit was the Fourth Army—twenty thousand soldiers under Altina’s direct control. Alongside them were the newly formed Twelfth and Thirteenth Armies, each with just as many men and a large supply of guns.

Latrielle was serious. He was demonstrating his stalwart will to conquer all the neighboring nations within two years.

“Still, our newcomers aren’t quite up to snuff yet,” Altina said with a shrug. “It’s going to be a while before they’re combat-ready.”

“Some of the Etruscan top brass seem to disagree,” Regis replied. “Their king had demanded a do-or-die resistance, so they usurped the throne. They’ve brought about political change through militaristic force—a coup d’état, so to speak—and their new leader has shown allegiance to Belgaria.”

“I see.” Altina nodded. “Well, the method aside...I’m thankful we won’t have to go to war.”

“Right.”

Belgaria had threatened to invade unless the Etruscan Army surrendered at once. Etruria’s rulers would be accepted as nobles of

the Empire if they agreed, but a harsh fate awaited those who submitted so soon after hostilities commenced.

By a rough estimate, Etruria had ten thousand troops remaining. Surrendering was the right decision—it was too reckless for them to fight against the Empire’s sixty thousand—and so the battle between the Belgarian and Etruscan Armies reached its anticlimactic conclusion.

Regis sighed. “The main issue is the next part...”

You are to conquer Hispania.

Regis could sense that the princess was overcome with rage the moment she heard the order. “*Généralissime*, this is an imperial command,” he reminded her.

“I know that!” Altina snapped. “I’m fine. Really. This isn’t my first time attacking our neighbors. We conquered Fort Volks, didn’t we?”

“We did.”

According to the letter, Belgaria had offered the Hispanian Empire the same terms: surrender before the invasion or perish. They had refused, and now Latrielle wanted them dealt with. He was giving Altina until April to suppress them.

It was the same situation as when they were ordered to capture Fort Volks in the Grand Duchy of Varden, except they now had a more reasonable sixty thousand troops at their disposal.

Are we really going to be all right, though? Regis wondered. *We’ll need to target civilian towns this time.*

The invasion would start off as a battle between armies, but as they seized victories and continued their advance, they would eventually need to capture towns as well. Would Altina be able to maintain a

level head under those circumstances? Regis grew anxious at the thought, but there was no other way.

“We have received our orders,” Regis told the messenger with a reverent bow of the head. “The *généralissime* shall carry out the invasion to the best of her ability.”

“I shall take the *généralissime*’s assent back to the capital,” the messenger replied. It was technically Regis who had accepted the mission, but his words were interpreted as having come from his commander.

Altina ordered her men to prepare somewhere for the messenger to rest; he had delivered a most troublesome command, but he was not to blame. After spending close to half a month racing south, he would need to head straight back the way he came.

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Once the audience was over, it was time for a council of war.

Regis first returned to his room to gather some materials; he had considered it only a matter of time before they would need to invade Hispania, so he had taken various steps in preparation. However, when he arrived, he found a large man standing in front of the door. Regis recoiled as he was caught in the daunting figure’s stern glare.

“Regis d’Aurick.”

“Gilbert. How can I be of assistance?”

“I’ve heard you’re going to invade Hispania.”

“News sure does travel fast...” Regis muttered. “That’s right. Oh, did you want to talk inside?” He reached around the Mercenary King to open the door and then gestured for him to enter.

Gilbert followed with a stern look on his face. “First the princess, then you...” he grumbled. “Does no one here know what it means to be wary?”

“Only a select few are allowed in these parts,” Regis explained as he began stacking up sheets on his desk. “We wouldn’t be nearly as productive if we had to spend time worrying about important staff officers being betrayed or assassinated. I trust you enough to have given you a unit, so I take no issue with your being here.”

“I understand that you’re very selective,” Gilbert said once he had shut the door behind him. “Why do you trust me?”

“Because the way I see it, betraying the Empire would put you in a very unfavorable situation.”

“I could take your and the princess’s heads and present them to Hispania. Haven’t you considered that?”

Regis gave a weak chuckle; then his lips curled into a bitter smile. “Belgaria can beat Hispania just fine, with or without me. I also think it unwise to assume Hispania can be so easily trusted.”

“You’re confident, are you?”

“I’m just conscious of a thing or two. You’ve seen our new guns, haven’t you?”

“They’re a crude imitation of what High Britannia accomplished.”

“Correct. But their performance is the same, if not better.”

“High Britannia lost,” Gilbert stated indifferently.

“True.”

It seemed that even Gilbert knew Hispania stood very little chance against the Empire. He hadn’t the slightest intent to betray Belgaria—that much was clear—so Regis tried to deduce the reason for his impromptu appearance.

“Is there another question you would rather ask?” Regis ventured.
“Is this idle banter meant to make me more talkative?”

Gilbert looked at him unpleasantly. “You’re quite similar to Jessica,” he said. “Annoyingly quick-witted.”

I think “annoying” is a bit much. She cares quite a lot about you.

“Your choice of small talk is a little too aggressive for me,” Regis admitted. “I would have much preferred a chat about the weather or dinner.”

“Does it look like I’m interested in either of those things?”

“Oh. I see.”

Gilbert folded his arms and leaned his back against the wall; Regis was sure he heard the room’s pillars creak in response. He then fixed the tactician with a serious look and said, “I thought you and the princess were pacifists.”

“We are.”

“Well, the order is for us to invade Hispania. Are you really going to fight?”

So that’s it...

Regis nodded to himself as the pieces came together. The Mercenary King had come to probe out his commander’s true intentions. The relationship between two nations was a complicated thing—it wasn’t rare for a war to begin and then remain unsettled for many years. It could end up being dragged on for the express purpose of waiting for peaceful arbitration.

During such wars, it was the mercenaries who sacrificed the most. A battle was only taken seriously when there was bloodshed, but no commander wanted to lose their own soldiers. That was why the mercenaries were sent out—why they died instead. Gilbert was wary of such a farce.

Regis shook his head. “Hispania will fall. His Majesty has said that we have until the snow melts. I want to end this within the year.”

“Huh?! You’re not trying to trick me, are you?”

“I think you’ll be convinced after you see the first battle.”

“What happened to pacifism?”

“I have my position to consider.”

“If you were that obedient,” Gilbert spat, “you wouldn’t have picked a fight with the prince who was almost a shoo-in to become the next emperor!”

Regis was surprised. He had assumed that Gilbert merely led the mercenaries in his brigade while Jessica made the plans, but he seemed to be quite sharp. Intelligence was a rare trait for the warrior types who often preferred to swing their weapons about without thinking.

“To be honest, I’m a little worried...” Regis admitted and scratched his head. “I fear the princess may change her mind when the time comes. She might insist that we must prioritize the people.”

“And you’re different?” Gilbert asked. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Hmm... How can I explain this? Pacifism is my ideal—the end goal that I strive toward.”

“Hm?”

“And that is precisely why we must defeat Hispania.”

“Jessica was right,” the Mercenary King said through gritted teeth. “This tactician sure loves to beat around the bush.”

“Ah. Sorry... To summarize my thoughts on the matter—Hispania’s current regime is a hindrance if we want to form peace treaties with the surrounding nations.”

“Explain.”

“Hispania is disguising its navy as pirates to attack merchant vessels. The nation is promoting theft and fraud.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“My idea of pacifism is for nations to help one another in times of crisis; I do not hold an unrealistic dream of avoiding battle entirely.”

“So you see Hispania as a crisis to face?” Gilbert asked, sounding rather amused.

“I won’t deny that. The nation has lost the spirit it was once founded with. Now, it seems no better than a large criminal organization.”

Hispania was formed after several powerful nations were divided and conquered. Around three hundred years had passed since the forces that gathered around a certain religious leader had scattered the local armies and proclaimed independence. Back then, the people were deeply pious...but the idea of creating “a pure and just land for the people of God” had since warped into the belief that all those outside the perceived “holy land” were impure and deserved no justice.

“I believe that Hispania’s deeds cannot be overlooked,” Regis proclaimed.

“Fine. You can convince me of your beliefs during battle.”

“All right.”

It seemed that Gilbert trusted him enough to at least participate on the battlefield. “Keep a firm hold of that princess’s reins,” he said before leaving.

“‘Reins’?”

She’s not a horse, Regis thought. Although he somehow understood exactly what he meant.



Two weeks later—

It was mid-November, yet the weather was fine enough for shorts. Regis rolled up his sleeves as he stood on the battlefield, staring at the enemy formation through a spyglass. The Hispanian Army looked to be around thirty thousand strong—just as reported.

Belgaria could not leave its base unguarded, so only the Fourth and Thirteenth Armies had mobilized. This gave them an advantage of ten thousand, and on the gently sloped terrain, the Empire had the high ground. Visibility was still somewhat limited, however; there were many rocks large enough for soldiers to hide behind and great trees that had yet to lose their leaves.

Altina was standing beside Regis and taking in the restricted view. “They must have chosen this location on purpose,” she said.

“I’m sure they did. The first few battles must have been enough to alert them of our firepower.”

There were several fortresses on the mountain range that served as the border—all effective structures that made good use of the territory’s natural steep inclines. Still, the battles had progressed the same as when the Empire recaptured Sempione.

Belgaria had assailed each fortress it encountered with cannon fire, forcing the enemy between a rock and a hard place—either they remained in their stronghold and endured the onslaught, awaiting the inevitable, or they marched out to meet their opponent. In the case of the latter, the Belgarian Army was unmatched on open plains. Perhaps the Hispanian Army had chosen this rocky terrain with that in mind; the riflemen would have a harder time taking aim, and cannons would prove less effective against its formation.

Altina drew her sword from her back. The metallic ring as it slipped from its scabbard drew all eyes to her. “If we can’t use guns, we’re on equal ground!” she declared.

“No, I never said we couldn’t use them...” Regis noted.

“So we can?”

“Yes. And not just the guns—our cannons are the latest model, so I reckon we’ll get decent use out of them too.”

As they continued their conversation, a report came in: “The enemy is moving!”

Regis returned to peering through the spyglass. “I see, I see...” he muttered. “It seems they intend to disperse through the shadows of the rocks and trees to approach us. I don’t know whether that’s very wise.”

“What do you suggest?” Altina asked. “On this terrain, we’ll need to meet them with a charge, otherwise they’ll overwhelm us with their momentum. If we’re not doing that, we’d best retreat.”

She’s thinking like a proper commander, Regis thought. Of course, she was especially clever for someone her age, but she had also experienced her fair share of combat and was being more diligent with her studies. Perhaps someday she would not need a tactician at all.

“But for now...she can leave things to me.”

“Did you say something, Regis?”

“The enemy’s tactics are effective against our old cannons.”

“But not our current ones?”

“Spreading out as they are costs them full control of their units. I don’t think they have too many on-site commanders skilled enough

to grasp their own position while straining to hear bugle orders and then issuing accurate orders to their men.”

One reason armies maintained formation was to facilitate the transmission of orders. This ensured the commander’s directions promptly reached their destination.

“Altina,” Regis said, “order the cannons to fire.”

“Is there a reason to...?”

“I’ve already told them what to target. You need only give the signal.”

“If you’ve already done that much, you don’t even need my involvement.”

“No... I wouldn’t say that.”

Regis had concealed his plan not because he looked down on Altina, but because he had a unique countermeasure for a number of possible enemy movements he had anticipated. Explaining them all was a waste of time, especially when it was unlikely that she would actually remember each one. She was now commanding forty thousand troops, and they had more types of units to work with than before. The battlefield was growing increasingly complicated.

Altina pouted. “Sure, I’ll give the signal,” she said as she raised a hand, “but at least tell me what you’re firing at.”

“The obstacles.”

“You can do that?”

“Well...we can certainly try. Have the front-row artillery open fire,” Regis said. They had already taken aim.

“Hmm...” Altina’s eyes were spinning. She thought the plan was ridiculous, but she saw no reason to refuse it. After taking a deep

breath, she raised her voice and said: “Front line! On your marks! Fire!”

Her order was echoed a beat later by a short and sharp bugle tone, and then—a thunderous burst of cannons shook the earth. The bang of a gun was considered intimidating enough, but the physical shock wave that resulted from the seemingly innumerable cannons was felt even through the troops’ uniforms. Those closest to the front lines were given small corks to plug their ears.

The Fourth Army now had at its disposal two hundred of the latest cannons, the shells of which were mightier than those of the High Britannian Type-41 Elswicks. Despite only being as heavy as the old midsize models, they boasted twice the firepower.

These cannons were known as the Type-40 Alain. They were breech-loaded and designed almost identically to High Britannia’s cannons, but the quality of the iron and gunpowder used was superior.

Unlike the Fusil 851s, the Type-40 Alains were not going to be produced in the tens of thousands; each individual cannon was instead the product of much time and effort. Belgaria’s blacksmithing techniques allowed for a superior build compared to those mass-produced in High Britannia—the precision on the barrels and chambers was far greater despite the identical construction, which made them lighter and more powerful.

In addition to this, while the High Britannian models required the cannonballs, powder charges, and primer to be inserted separately, the Type-40 Alain fused them all into metal cartridges. These tidy packages saved on labor and made the cannons quicker to reload, although it came with the downside of making each shell heavier. A single shot weighed as much as a hundred livres (around fifty kilograms)...and yet the Belgian foot soldiers hoisted them about as though they were nothing.

Shots fired one after the next, making the very air around them tremble. Their ammunition took not the round shape of a cannonball, but the more pointed design of a rifle bullet. These masses of metal flew faster than sound.

Those of the Belgarian Army cheered as the rocks and trees dotting the landscape were blown to pieces, and the scattered Hispanian Army was suddenly faced with an entirely new battlefield. Countless muzzles were pointed their way, and the dispersed units were unable to regain unity—some charged while others ran away.

By the time the enemy commander had given the retreat order, their thirty thousand soldiers had been reduced to twenty thousand. Corpses littered the devastated earth.

Regis shuddered. “Guns really are terrifying...”

“Right,” Altina agreed.

“Not too long ago, most of the soldiers who could no longer fight were simply injured. Most would live and return to their homelands.”

“But with guns like these...things are different.”

“Yeah...” Regis replied. He could feel an intense pressure weighing heavy on his heart.

“But we have to keep moving forward. Don’t we, Regis?”

“We do. If we can’t win the battle before us, our ideals will remain dreams and nothing more.”

Altina nodded and then thrust out her sword. “All troops, advance!”

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Légumes

In Belgaria, it was common to eat vegetables such as string beans, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, cabbage, asparagus, and numerous types of mushroom. Due to the vastness of the territory and the lack of modern transportation technologies, much variety could be observed from region to region.

Brilliantly colored vegetables that grew aboveground were highly sought after within the Empire—tomatoes and eggplants, for instance, were the pride of a noble's dinner table. Those that grew beneath the earth, in contrast, were unpopular even among the common folk. When potatoes and carrots were initially brought to the continent, it was some time before they spread throughout the lands. They first found their way to the plates of nobles during a famine caused by rising populations and drought, and only after rumor of this spread did the commoners begin to partake in root vegetables as well.

During the potato's initial debut in Belgaria, it became popular among noblewomen and children not as a food source but as a decoration, as many would pluck and wear the flowers that grew on the plant.



(As a minor digression, the potato first arrived in Europe around the year 1550 on the Gregorian calendar. Guns had started seeing use on the battlefield over a century before then, in approximately 1410, but knights clad in armor still proudly roamed the battlefield through the 1700s and even to some degree in 1914 during the First World War. It was not rare to see knights eating potatoes in their forts.)

Tomatoes began circulating through the continent before potatoes. They were cultivated from seeds brought from the high mountains of the new world and were initially raised for their aesthetics. It was two hundred years before they were selectively bred for food.

As mentioned in a previous chapter, bread was the staple food of the Belgian Empire. For that reason, no vegetable was ever valued as highly as wheat, even when they were regarded as luxury items. As a result, root vegetables—which were resistant to weather and able to grow in even the poorest-quality soil—became a necessity for those who could not even afford plain bread.

During this particular era in Belgian history, vegetables were predominantly used in soups. Cooking oil was expensive, so stir- and deep-frying were a luxury. Given the undeveloped transport system and severe lack of preservation methods, fresh vegetables were a rare find. Salads and steamed vegetables were scarcely eaten, while beans and veggies were simply stewed in a pot with meat. Ginger, cinnamon, and nutmeg were occasionally tossed in for flavor based on the preferences of each household.

In later years, as social systems changed all across the world, the foods that once graced only the plates of nobility became celebrated as national dishes. Ironically, the nations with the greatest wealth disparities—the ones where the nobles lived in luxury while the masses went hungry—were the ones with the most developed food cultures.

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Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess XIII*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This time, the story focuses on Regis and Altina as they're sent to aid those fighting a war in the south. I've already written a few head-on battles so far, and I wanted to try something that developed a little differently.

Also, I won't be adding any more heroines to the story; instead, I decided to try delving deeper into the girls we have already. I hope you enjoyed it.

At Emperor Latrielle's order, the invasion has finally begun. I tried to write about the contrast between swords and spears and guns and cannons in greater detail.

My current aim is to put out around two volumes a year, so expect the next one in the summer!

On another note, *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord*, a series I'm writing with Kodansha, has somehow gotten an anime adaptation. To think I'm going to be seeing it on air... Maybe *Altina* too, if it gets popular enough! Yeah, I shouldn't get ahead of myself... I hope you can enjoy both series.

As for the other things I'm working on: *The Fourteen-Year-Old and the Illustrator*, my work-based comedy with MF Bunko, is receiving a manga adaptation! Kamelie-sensei is going to be handling the illustrations. I'm also in charge of writing the main scenario for the DMM release of *LBX Girls*. I'm essentially working on this one for free, but give it a shot if you want. And finally, *Millennium War Aigis: The White Empire Arc* is being published with Famitsu Bunko.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. Once again, you've drawn such wonderful illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Hishino-sama from Afterglow. I can never thank you enough.

To my editor, Wada-sama. This year, I'm going to become someone who honors deadlines. I swear! You'll start seeing a little improvement. I think...

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 13!

Murasaki-san,
Wada-san,
I always have fun
working on this
series. Thank you.

 *Discy*

I drew Renoir,
the little girl
who made her
first appearance
in the last volume.

“Forming an alliance with such an influential figure has made business far smoother, and for that, you have my gratitude.

The Fourth Army’s exploits have made our investment a

highly successful one.”



Third Daughter
Renoir



Vixen of the South
Elenore

Généralissime
Altina



“Um...
‘Investment’?”

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Altina’s rigorous studies had taught her a lot about the importance of money but her blank, perplexed expression made it clear that she didn’t quite follow.

“What...?”

“I **confessed**

my feelings to Mr. Regis and now it seems he is feeling quite bothered about it.”

Altina's Maid
Clarisse

Altina had frozen in place.



Bang!

The roar of a gunshot pierced the air and a single hole opened up in the set of armor leaned against the wall, right where the heart would have been had a human been wearing it. Eric swiftly loaded a new bullet, took stance again, and—

Bang!

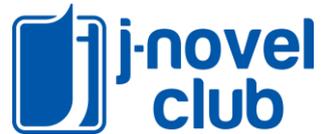
This time, he blew open a hole in the brow of the helmet. Those watching were astir.

Imperial Sharpshooter
Eric



ALTA

the Sword Princess



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