

XIV

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

Illustrator: himesuz



LETINA

the Sword Princess

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XIV



“Hah...
Hah... Hah...
Why did you...
leave me
behind...?!”

It was Marion.

“Because
you’re so slow.”

“It was time
for the meeting
and you still hadn’t
returned, so I...”

He averted his gaze with
a look of displeasure.





*“His Majesty
fears
Belgaria’s steam
engine.”*

General
Frasier

Hispanian Tactician
Mariam



*“His
opinions
on the steam
engine are
irrelevant.
If we allow
Barcedella to
fall, Belgaria
will march all
the way to our
capital!”*

She watched the falling snow through the carriage window.

“It was snowing back when we first met.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t the sort that melted away when it touched the ground, though; it was a fierce blizzard.”

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

“I never knew it snowed **this** far south.”

“Thankfully, I accounted for bad weather when I did my calculations.”

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

ALTEINIA

the Sword Princess





High
Britannia

M E R

Varden

Langobarti

● Fort Volks

● Verseilles

Estaburg

● Aloe-Marroe

Belgarian
Empire

● Sembione

Hispania

● Fort Barcedella

● Quintanal

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.

Latrielle soon takes the throne, after which Altina is appointed *généralissime* and dispatched to assist the struggling southern front. Regis naturally accompanies the princess as her tactician, and after dealing with incompetence and disloyalty the likes of which he had never imagined, he manages to regain the Empire's lost territory.

As the dust begins to settle, Elize begins her return to High Britannia with the assistance of prominent southern noble Elenore. Once in her motherland, she is set to be crowned Queen Elizabeth

Victoria...and yet Regis still entrusts her with improvements on the latest firearms.

The curtain opens on a new battle for Altina as Emperor Latrielle orders her to press onward and invade the Hispanian Empire. The nation has been disguising its navy as pirates to attack merchant vessels, and while Regis is against military conquest, he believes these deeds cannot be overlooked.

Resolved to put a stop to such transgressions, the combined forty thousand soldiers of the Fourth and Thirteenth Armies cross the border into Hispania, where they face off against thirty thousand soldiers of the Hispanian Army. Their battle takes place on a nameless hill, and the enemy begins their approach by dividing into smaller units and using rocks and trees as cover. Their plans are soon thwarted, however, as the obstacles they rely on are blown to pieces by Belgaria's latest cannons, and as the Hispanian troops hesitate, they fall victim to a volley of gunfire.

Her foe is devastated and on the retreat, but the princess must keep moving forward. She thrusts out her sword and gives the order.

“All troops, advance!”

Prelude: Dominance

Imperial Year 851, November 17th—

The latest rifles thundered in chorus. Altina's Fourth Army had more experience with these firearms than any other unit in the Empire, and their lines remained orderly even in real combat. Their reloading speed was quick and their aim precise.

"Tirez!"

The dispersed Hispanian soldiers were shot one after another as though they were mere practice dummies. Yet still, the enemy continued their charge.

«Adelante! Adelante! Adelante!»

Altina grimaced from atop Caracarla, her trusty steed. Although her army remained supreme, she could not conceal her disgust at so many needless deaths. The Hispaniards were like gnats rushing into a bonfire.

"Why won't they retreat?"

Regis watched the same battlefield from beside her—though on his own feet, as he could not ride a horse. "They're so spread out that their commander's orders must not be able to reach them all," he ventured.

"Then should they have not stayed in close formation?"

"In hindsight, perhaps—but their army intended to hide behind obstacles to approach us. In which case, having smaller units move freely would actually protect them from the gunfire."

"I see. They never anticipated this situation."

"I wouldn't blame them..."

Prior to the battle, the terrain had been covered with rocks and trees, offering a much wider variety of cover. The enemy commander had purposely chosen this field to prevent the Empire from using its new guns and cannons to their fullest effect—obstructing the Belgarian Army’s vision would eliminate the advantage afforded to them by their guns’ higher range and output.

However, Regis had already anticipated this plan. The moment he saw the enemy disperse, he ordered Belgaria’s two hundred Type-40 Alain cannons to fire upon the obstacles, leaving the Hispanian soldiers completely out in the open. They had charged recklessly into this completely new terrain, and many had been shot dead before they had even noticed that their plan had failed.

Altina didn’t look convinced. “Do they not have bugles to order a retreat like we do?” she asked.

“I would assume they do,” Regis replied. “Given the ceaseless gunfire, however, I would assume their signals are traveling nowhere near as far as they’re used to.”

Of course, the noise was coming entirely from the Belgarian Army—and at Regis’s orders.

“Wait... Doesn’t that apply to us too, then?” Altina asked. “Can our men not hear our bugles?”

“Have we ever had that problem before?”

“No. Never,” Altina replied. The Fourth Army had more experience in battles involving lines of gunmen, and the bugles’ orders had never failed to reach their mark.

“In the Belgarian Army, when the commander—that is, when *you* give the order, the main camp’s bugle will sound. The message is relayed again and again by buglers stationed all along the way until it reaches the front lines. Of course, we send messengers too, just in case.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Were you wondering why I hired more buglers?”

“I just assumed we needed them because we have more soldiers,” Altina said, scratching her head. “I didn’t consider that our signals could be drowned out by gunfire.”

“I see... I must have failed to explain it.”

Regis checked his pocket watch before sending an order to one of those very same buglers. Even in a one-sided encounter, the riflemen were rapidly exhausting their supplies and their members; the line would soon need to be changed out.

Far in the distance, a line of smoke rose from the enemy’s rear guard. They must have realized that their bugles were proving ineffective and shifted to a new plan. It was too late to be of much use, but still, the retreat order went through.

“Those Hispaniards are running away!” Altina exclaimed, pointing at the enemy army. “Retreating” or “pulling back” were generally considered more appropriate terms, but the enemy was not in formation, and they were leaving in scattered clusters. It truly did appear as though they had turned tail and fled.

“I recall them having about thirty thousand men to begin with,” Regis said as he gazed across the battlefield. “Do you think they’re down to twenty thousand now?”

“It’s awful...”

Regis shuddered; the fields before them were strewn with corpses. “Guns really are terrifying...” he muttered.

“Right.”

“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. After everything he had experienced—after all the times he had made his resolve—this knowledge still pained 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 brandished the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—the sword of the Empire. “Ready, men!” she cried.

The knights took the vanguard, with the foot soldiers following behind them. The riflemen had now retreated to the very back of the formation, although their role in this battle was far from over. These gunmen swapped their rifles for spears and formed a defensive perimeter around the main camp.

Attaching a blade onto the end of a gun had already been devised and tested in combat, but the result was less than ideal. In order to be used, the blade—known as a bayonet—needed to be plugged into the muzzle, meaning the gun could not be fired. The makeshift spears were also too short to be used effectively, so the Fourth Army instead supplied their riflemen with real ones.

Altina thrust her sword toward the enemy. “All troops, advance!”

Their current engagement was hardly even a battle at this point, but backing down was not an option. The Hispanian Army had been routed, but there was no knowing whether this was a surrender or a retreat.

The Belgarian Army took out another five thousand in their pursuit before the encounter reached its end.

Chapter 1: The Thirteenth Army

Evening—

A lone officer approached Regis's tent, which was pitched near the army's strategic headquarters. She looked to be around twenty, her chestnut hair was cut uniformly at her shoulders, and she wore a stern expression. Her salute came straight from the manuals of the academy.

"Pardon my intrusion, Strategist Regis d'Aurick, sir!" she called from outside. "I am Second-Grade Combat Officer Marion Alphons de Barguesonne of the Thirteenth Army, sir!"

"Come in," Regis replied. "And my apologies. I would have asked you to meet with me in the main tent, but my paperwork has grown a little out of control."

"Please, pay it no mind."

Regis's tent was crowded with stacks upon stacks of papers detailing his research on the region and documents pertaining to the management of the army. Officers would normally report to Altina during times of war, but even just moving the relevant materials over to the main tent would have been a Herculean effort, and it was for this reason that Regis was conducting such meetings in his own quarters. Lately, some were even lumping his personal tent in as an extension of the army's strategic headquarters.

"Under normal circumstances, I would give my proposals to the *généralissime*, who would then make the final decision and give the order..." Regis said.

"I see. Has Her Highness retired for the night, then?"

"No... She should be practicing her swordsmanship around now."

“Practicing?” Marion repeated, confused. She had originally been deployed on the eastern front as part of the Seventh Army and was only recalled once the situation calmed down. Now, she was responsible for the Thirteenth Army, but she was still unaccustomed to Altina’s way of doing things. A commander would not usually train the night after a battle—they would usually be too busy dealing with the aftermath, and when that was done, they would need to rest.

“Indeed,” Regis replied, looking rather feeble. “And considering that we’ve entered the age of the gun, I would much rather the *généralissime* stopped running off to the front lines.”

“I agree, but as my grandfather used to say: ‘A soldier must never neglect their spear, no matter the times.’ He also said that a commander who isn’t confident in their own abilities is most likely to fall apart at the most critical moment.”

Marion’s grandfather was the late Lieutenant General Bargesonne, an experienced and courageous leader. Meanwhile, Regis was so useless with a sword that he risked cutting his own knees with every swing. He hadn’t an ounce of confidence, and he had indeed fallen apart when it counted—something that he regretted to this day. It was because of these shortcomings that he had ended up powerless as his political enemy Prince Latrielle took the throne.

“You touched a bit of a nerve there...” Regis said with a sigh.

“Ah, err... I’m sorry! That wasn’t my intention!”

“No, don’t worry. The late lieutenant general spoke the truth.”

“I...I’m honored that you think so.”

Regis only had one minor point of contention—Altina was swinging her sword not as some means of tempering her spirit, but rather because she believed that she could strike down any foe, even one armed with a gun. She was considering tactics in her own way,

although it was the tactician's duty to ensure that she never needed to take up arms in the first place.

"Now then..." Regis spread a map over the table. "About the Thirteenth Army's patrol routes for tonight."

"Of course," Marion replied. She listened intently as Regis explained the plan to deploy part of their unit over a considerably vast region, but her surprise was noticeable. "Can they really keep watch over that large of an area?"

"They'll need to. We may have powerful guns and cannons, but we lose our superiority at night," Regis explained. The chances of a night raid were high, so they needed to be especially vigilant—far more so than what had once been common sense in Belgaria.

Marion nodded. "I see... New countermeasures for new weapons. And those countermeasures will need further countermeasures after that."

"That's how I see it. Guns have changed the rules of the battlefield, and new rules necessitate new plans."

"You really are an amazing tactician..." Marion replied, her eyes brimming with respect. Regis found it a little too much and scratched at his head in response.

"Err... Anyone could have come up with what I'm proposing."

"Really? Well, this is the first time I've seen a patrol route like this." The routes drawn on the map had the sentries double back on themselves several times over.

"Oh, this was inspired by *The Records of Perisa*. People who are trying to slip through a surveillance net often target an area immediately after the sentry has passed through. Having them turn back every now and again and making it so that routes overlap lowers the chances of anyone... Hm?"

Marion was staring at Regis. She seemed quite perplexed.

“Ah. Was that too hard to follow?” Regis asked.

“Oh, no. I didn’t have a problem with that. But, um... *The Records of Perisa*? I’m ashamed to say I’ve never heard of such a book before.”

“That really is a shame. It wasn’t a best seller, so maybe it never reached the stores on the border... Oh, but it’s an interesting read, so I would absolutely recommend it. I think you should be able to find a copy in the capital.”

“Understood, sir! Would it happen to be a war record, or perhaps a book on tactics?”

“Hmm?” Regis tilted his head. “It’s a work of fiction.”

“Huh...?”

“No, no. You don’t have to be so skeptical. The author, Boissel, spent many years as a military record keeper, and his work offers a rather deep insight into the system.”

“But the story is made up... Oh, are you joking with me?”

“Not in the slightest!”

For the next few minutes, Regis advocated for the magnificence of the book in what ended up being a rather forceful attempt to sing its praises.

✧ ✧ ✧

Marion saluted and turned to leave the tent. The dark was beginning to set in.

I got a little too heated talking about books there... Regis thought, breaking into a cold sweat. If our surveillance net isn’t set up in time, I could be beheaded for this.

Before Marion could take her leave, however, another individual appeared at the entrance to the tent. She had pale hair, pure-white skin, and slender limbs—like a spirit straight from the pages of a fairy tale. Completing the image was her exposing dress that was wholly inappropriate for the battlefield. It was jarring enough that even those who saw her around the camp struggled to believe she was a mercenary, when in reality, she was deputy head of the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu. She was not a fighter and instead proved her mettle in tactics and negotiation.

“Oh dear,” Jessica said. “Were you in the middle of a strategy meeting?”

“We just finished up,” Regis replied.

Marion looked at their new visitor suspiciously. “Tactician...she’s a civilian, isn’t she? What might she be here for?”

Come to think of it, I don’t think they’ve met before.

As famous as they were, Renard Pendu was simply a mercenary brigade under the Fourth Army’s employ. They had not even a thousand men under their command, and their deputy commander was never called to any of their war councils—although that was because Jessica rarely ever went outside.

“Oh, Sir Aurick...” Jessica said with a giggle. “It seems there has been a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding?” Regis repeated.

“This lady here—she suspects I am a harlot you called for.”

Regis almost choked on his drink while Marion’s face went beet red. “I-I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort!” she stammered. “I-I just thought those were strange clothes, considering where we are, and... Er...”

It seemed that Jessica's accusation was more than just conjecture. Even Regis was starting to turn red. "No, no, no..." he muttered. "Don't be ridiculous. This person is..."

Jessica theatrically brushed aside her flowing locks, revealing her pale nape in a manner that was unmistakably sensual. "My, my. To think those were your intentions..." she said. "But you are deserving of a reward, I suppose."

"I've never thought of you in that way before."

"Really? Even when you called me pretty?"

"Wait!"

It was true that Regis had complimented Jessica's appearance, but the way she was recounting it was tremendously misleading.

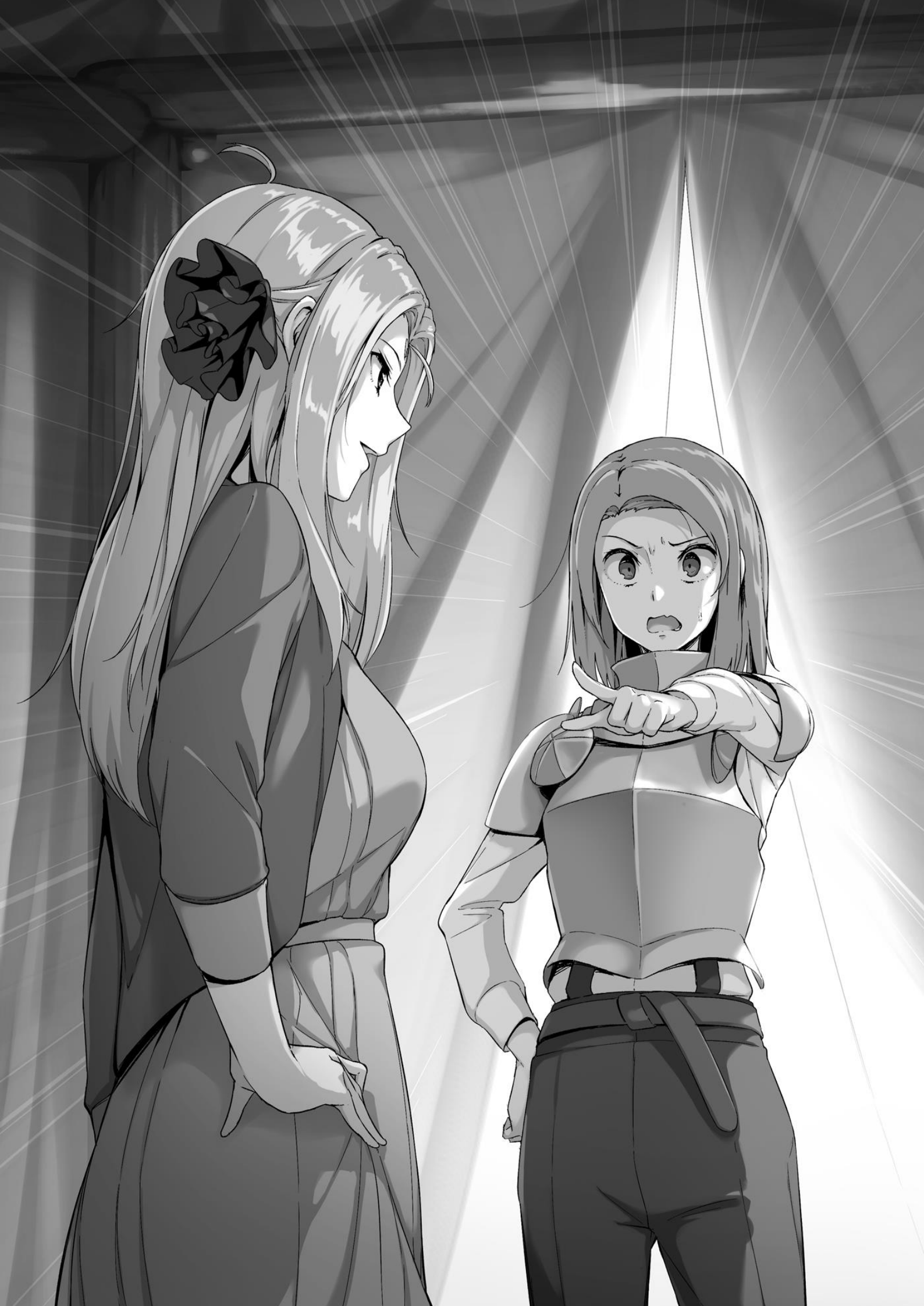
There was a particularly grave look on Marion's face. "I thought the Black Knight was an exception," she muttered to herself, "but now even the tactician is calling such women to the battlefield..."

Regis sighed; the record needed to be set straight. "Ms. Jessica, is it really necessary to tease our earnest soldiers?" he asked.

"Oho ho... Her face when she saw me was just too interesting to ignore."

Upon hearing this, Marion fixed Jessica with a hard stare. "Who are you really?"

"Jessica Schweinzeberg, deputy chief of the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu," came Jessica's response. She was usually so mild-mannered, but for some reason, she was acting strangely incendiary. "If you call yourself an officer, then you should know better than to judge a book by its cover."



The two women were exchanging fierce looks.

How did it come to this...? Regis wondered, trying to endure the uncomfortable squeezing sensation in his gut. “Um... Officer Marion, I’m counting on you to regulate those patrols. And what are you here for, Ms. Jessica?”

Marion appeared to come to a sudden realization, as though she had only then remembered her duty. She exclaimed, “My apologies! I shall make haste!” with a crisp salute and then exited the tent, although her steps seemed notably more aggressive than when she had entered.

Once Marion was gone, Jessica shrugged. “A bumpkin through and through.”

“It’s not like you to pick a fight with someone,” Regis observed.

“Oh, please. That little girl—she degraded such a grand work as *mere fiction*.”

“So you were outside long enough to have overheard that.”

Jessica was actually an avid reader herself—one of the few people Regis could view as a comrade in that regard. She may not have been the sort to recommend that others read as well, but she silently seethed when others mocked a book that she enjoyed.

“How could she insult the great Boissel like that?” Jessica complained. “Especially when she has yet to even read his works.”

“Now, now. I think her response was precisely *because* she hasn’t read his works.”

“A savage like that would never understand them anyway. There is no need for you to go out of your way to teach her, Sir Aurick.”

“It’s quite all right. I don’t read because I want to be respected. I may seem like a fool for going on about that book, but maybe she’ll see it someday and feel compelled to pick it up.”

“You really are...” Jessica trailed off, and her expression appeared to soften. Regis met this sudden change with a wry smile.

“Did you come here to discuss books? If so, you’re quite welcome.”

Jessica sighed. “A mercenary’s only interest the night after a battle is information.”

“I suppose you’re right. That’s a shame. I wanted to talk about a particular volume that I’ve just finished reading.”

“You look rather tired.”

“Still. I could muster the strength to last until daybreak.”

“Really, now. You should try that line on the *généralissime*...”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure Altina would fall asleep before we even reached the good parts. She’s not all that good with complex topics like religion.”

Regis had been hoping for a book-related discussion, so the true reason for Jessica’s arrival came as somewhat of a disappointment, but he moved on to answer her questions nonetheless.

✧ ✧ ✧

“That was a crushing victory,” Jessica remarked as she was invited inside. “Would you not agree?”

Regis took out two cups and filled them with water from his pitcher. “About halfway successful, in my opinion. I was hoping they would surrender.”

“What happened to the enemy army?”

“They returned to their base of operations at Fort Barcedella. I estimate them having fifteen thousand troops remaining.”

Jessica accepted one of the cups from Regis and then took a seat. “This seems like an easy win.”

Belgaria’s invading force consisted of the Fourth and Thirteenth Armies, each of which had twenty thousand soldiers. They were nearly untouched so far.

Regis took a sip of water and sat on the bed, since Jessica had claimed the only chair. “Hispania is a naval power,” he said. “Their only land border is with Belgaria, so they aren’t very strong on land.”

“Why did the Empire not attack them sooner, then?”

“An invasion was far too risky while Etruria was the bigger threat. The southern nobles were also an uncertain factor.”

“Now that you mention it, those nobles were only recently brought into the Belgaria fold...”

The nobles of the south had once been the kings and nobles of a handful of smaller powers. They had surrendered to the Empire without resistance, so they were granted titles and allowed to govern their original territories, but some came to renounce Belgarian rule. Lieutenant General Dorvale and the Sixth Army had spent over half a year putting down one such rebellion.

“And most importantly, Belgaria has been stagnant for many years,” Regis said. “The late emperor was not keen on expansion.”

The only reason the Empire had expanded south was out of necessity, to accommodate its growing population. And had the southern powers not sided with Belgaria, they most likely would have been invaded by Etruria or Hispania instead.

Jessica nodded. “Emperor Latrielle’s policies will mean more work for us mercenaries.”

“Didn’t you say that your brigade is like family to you? War will mean death in no short supply. Peace will reduce the demand for mercenaries—I can’t deny that—but there are many fine jobs where you won’t have to lose anyone.”

“Do the men of our brigade really look suited to doing anything else?”

“Well, they’re robust enough to wage war; they should have plenty of options.”

“Let us hope so...” Jessica replied simply. Although she was skeptical, she did not disregard Regis’s words outright. She trusted him enough to have at least some faith.

“We’ll need to start by conquering Fort Barcedella,” Regis said, returning the conversation to the war at hand.

“And after that?”

“We estimate that Hispania houses an additional fifty thousand soldiers. There might even be more.”

“A surprisingly high figure...”

“They aren’t engaged in war on any other fronts, meaning they can concentrate all of their forces on us. Gathering these forces should prove an easy task for them too, since they can quickly muster the troops dispersed around their territory by boat.”

Hispania was for the most part limited to small sailing ships, but they were useful enough in the seas close to shore. Such vessels could carry more goods than carriages, and they were faster to boot. This came with a downside, however, as these less-seaworthy crafts were not so maneuverable in open water.

Regis pointed at the map that was still spread across the table. “Fort Barcedella faces the sea, which means this battle won’t be the same

as the ones we've fought so far." He had been out to sea once, but the army only had experience with land warfare.

Jessica nodded again with her eyes fixed on the map. "They may be small crafts, but their cannons will still reach us at that distance."

"Indeed. We may have the latest cannons, but realistically, we can only bring our midsize ones across the mountains on the border. Meanwhile, although the cannons on our enemy's ships may be older models, they're almost guaranteed to be larger."

"If we end up exchanging fire, will we lose?"

"...I would think so," Regis replied after a moment. In truth, it was hard to say, but there was an unmistakably high chance that they would suffer massive losses. "It would be easier if we could beat them at sea."

"Indeed. And conveniently enough, I seem to recall you capturing some High Britannian steamships."

"Yes. The first was dismantled for analysis, but the second should still be in working order."

"Can you use it? As long as you can win at sea, the terrain will give us the advantage. We might even be able to take them without a land battle."

"Perhaps, but the captured ship was under the jurisdiction of the former Ministry of Military Affairs and now belongs to the First Army. Even if we had it ourselves, we would need to dedicate more time to researching the steam engine and training men to operate it properly. And if we were to end up losing it, we would set the imperial navy back twenty years. I doubt the emperor would dare take such a risk."

Jessica scoffed. “Then he is a bigger coward than I thought. Those who are reluctant to use the ace up their sleeve often never end up using it at all.”

“Well, there isn’t much we can do about that. I think we should pin our hopes on the ships the Empire is currently building.”

“When will they be completed?”

“They’re already doing test runs. As it turns out, the shipwrights simply motorized a few existing Aeterna-class vessels, so they’re already packing the firepower we need. It’s just a matter of getting them moving.”

“Use them, then.”

“Aha... Believe me. I’ve put in a request. I just haven’t heard anything back yet.”

The navy was almost entirely under the First Army’s control—a saddening development that might set the Fourth Army back should they decide to oppose Latrielle in the future. Regis very much wanted to maintain contact with High Britannia, so this was a matter that required adequate consideration.

“Very well,” Jessica said. “I understand the Hispanian Army’s strategy—at least for the most part. You *have* thought up a countermeasure against the sea bombardment, right?”

“...No,” Regis admitted. “Coming up with plans is very much beyond me.”

“Right,” Jessica replied. It was especially roundabout, but she knew exactly what he was trying to say. “Go on, then. From where did you get your inspiration?”

Regis laughed dryly. “It’s a little old now, but there’s a book called *Roy et Pueri*.”

“Not even I recognize that title. When was it written?”

“Ten years before either of us were born, I believe.”

“Oh? Pray tell, at what point did I give you my age?”

“Now that you mention it...” Regis paused for a moment in thought. Jessica may not have told him her age, but based on her appearance, she seemed to be about as old as him—if not just a little older.

“For all you know, I might be older than your mother.”

No, that can't be true... Regis thought. But then again, she was known as “the Magician.”

In the end, Regis decided to raise the white flag. “I should have known better than to bring up a woman’s age,” he said. “How about we just say it’s a book that can’t be obtained easily?”

“How wise of you. So, was this thirty-year-old book one you obtained from the military library?”

“You won’t believe this, but—it was being stocked at a bookstore in Sembione!”

“Excuse me?!”

Their conversation had ended up on something of a tangent, and it would continue as such for quite a while longer.

The next day—

The Belgianian Army marched on Fort Barcedella. Among their main camp, Altina could be seen atop her horse, while Regis was inside his white carriage. This was not only due to his lack of riding skills; the table inside made it a moving strategy room.

The maid Clarisse was sitting across from him. “Mr. Regis, it seems you were up very late last night...” she observed.

“Ah, yes. Funny you should mention that...”

“Talking with Ms. Jessica.”

“We were discussing our plans henceforth. I’ve asked her to guard our supply unit.”

“Is that so?”

“She’s the tactician of a mercenary brigade that has a great deal of combat experience. Her opinions serve as a valuable reference point.”

“I see,” Clarisse replied with a nod. “That’s good to hear. I was under the impression you had spent the entire night talking about interesting books, but I must have been mistaken.”

Regis suddenly felt a shiver run down his spine. “You were listening...?”

“Oh dear. Was that supposed to be a secret?”

“Aha... For what it’s worth...it *was* supposed to be a strategy meeting.”

“My apologies, then. Ah, a secret between you and Ms. Jessica...”

“Did you hear a word of what I just said...?” Regis asked. The way she was phrasing it would invite all manner of misunderstandings.

“I was only joking,” Clarisse replied in a composed voice.

“Seriously... I can never tell with you. It’s quite troubling.”

“But what would the princess think, I wonder...?”

“Please don’t!”

Clarisse chuckled. Regis knew deep down that she was just teasing him, but it was bad for his heart nonetheless. He had done nothing to warrant feeling ashamed, but for some reason, he was apprehensive about Altina knowing he had partaken in a fun chat about books.

Yes, even though there was no plausible reason for him to hide such a fact...

“You know,” Clarisse said, “the princess was waiting for you to visit her last night.”



“Huh? Really?! She could have called for me if she needed something...”

“I don’t think she needed anything.”

That would explain why she had never actually sent for him. Perhaps she had simply wanted to talk.

Regis looked down at the floor of the carriage. “Although it’s true that we hardly suffered any damages, it was still the night after a battle...” He could understand her desire to be with someone—perhaps that was the same reason he had so enjoyed speaking with Jessica.

To make matters worse, Altina had nobody else here whom she could consider a friend. A noblewoman would normally have at least an attendant following them around, but she was on the battlefield not as a royal princess, but as the *généralissime*. She hadn’t the leisure to bring along a conversation partner and was reliant on Clarisse to fulfill that role.

“You’re very special to the princess, Mr. Regis. No one could replace you—not even me.”

“Do you really think so?”

“You don’t need to be with her all the time, but please, make some room in your schedule to talk to her. And not just about military business.”

“I see.”

It was a strange request, but even pointless conversation could serve an important purpose. Altina was embroiled in an invasion that she wholeheartedly opposed. Perhaps this was weighing on her mind, in which case she would definitely need some consideration.

“Thank you,” Regis said with a nod. “You’re always helping me out.”

“I wouldn’t say I’ve done anything special.”

“It was quite significant to me.”

“Is that so? Can I expect to be paid back in kind, then?”

“Huh? ‘Paid back’?” Regis was immediately on guard. This was often where the maid would tease him, but instead, she was watching him with a quizzical expression.

“Is that too much to ask?”

“No, no... Of course not. What can I do for you?”

“There’s something I’d like you to tell me.”

“I’ll tell you anything I can.”

“Do you...like her?” she asked, her voice lowered to a whisper.

“Huh?”

“Ms. Jessica.”

Regis thought for a moment. Jessica was beautiful, she shared in his hobbies, and she had been in his company for longer than he had expected. Her looks and demeanor had stolen some of the soldiers’ hearts already, but... His conclusion was the same.

“No,” Regis replied. “She has the right to choose whom she dates, and she would never choose me.” He had absolutely no confidence in his own appeal.

“Oh really? But whether you believe you can end up with her is irrelevant—you can still pine for her all the same.”

“I suppose I can still appreciate the wonder of a book I’ll never touch in my lifetime...”

“In fact, wouldn’t it being out of reach make you long for it even more?”

“I’ve read plenty of stories like that...”

“So I’ll ask again—do you like her?”

“Hm...”

Regis mulled over the question. Reciting information from a book was easy for him, but he struggled quite a lot when it came to speaking about himself—after all, there was no book that laid bare the inner workings of his own mind.

“I understand that she is an appealing woman,” he eventually said with a wry smile, “but it doesn’t feel right of me to say that I do like her. To be honest, I’ve never really put much thought into love in the first place.”

Clarisse sighed. “You really are a unique case, Mr. Regis.”

“Did my answer disappoint you?”

“I’m not really sure. Now, on a completely unrelated note...do you like the princess?”

“Huh?! Wh-What’s this, all of a sudden?!” Regis exclaimed. He nearly fell out of his seat in shock, which made Clarisse burst into laughter.

“I...have my position to consider. I will refrain from answering that question.”

“Very well. Aha... Let’s leave it at that, then.”

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It was after noon when the imperial army began to set up a new campsite near Fort Barcedella. In the main tent, where a war council was being held, a knight clad in vermilion armor gave a firm salute.

“First-Grade Combat Officer Abidal-Evra, captain of the Flying Swallow Knights, reporting in!” he announced.

“Good work out there,” Regis replied as he returned the salute.

“How is your brigade faring?” Altina asked. She was already seated at the head of the long table.

Abidal-Evra pressed his heels together. “They are fatigued from the long march, but they are rich in morale and starving to prove their worth on the battlefield. They don’t want to be upstaged by the riflemen.”

“Sounds like we can count on them.”

“It’s getting bad enough that some of our members are saying their horses might be of more use pulling wagons. They want to participate in a battle that involves more than just chasing down a fleeing foe.”

Altina chuckled. “It won’t be much longer—I can assure you of that.”

A stream of easy victories had inspired a very lackadaisical atmosphere among the Belgarian Army. Attending the war council were all the important officers of the Fourth Army and Eric, now known as one of the best shots in the Empire. He was standing at attention behind Altina, his gun at the ready in case he should need to protect her. Not long ago, he had been somewhat restless and seemed largely out of place. Now, he was far more reticent, with a peculiar air to him.

In charge of the army’s heavy infantry was Second-Grade Combat Officer Barasco, an expert soldier from the days when Altina had commanded a mere border regiment. He was about as old as Everard—the fact that his hair had turned completely white attested to this—but he was still competitive enough to challenge every man who commented on his age and spirited enough to outlast them in combat. Of course, some may have described these traits as “immaturity” instead.

“Forget about the cavalry,” Barasco snapped, evidently becoming frustrated. “By the time our infantry reaches the battlefield, we’ve got nothing to fight but mountains of corpses!”

The other officers watched the old hand with troubled expressions...and then a lone, hearty laugh came from somewhere among them. “Ah ha ha!” a knight in black armor chortled. “It must be nice to have things so easy!”

Barasco harrumphed. “Who are you again?”

“Oh, my apologies! We only united with your forces the other day. I am Third-Grade Combat Officer Holger Orjes, currently looking after the Black Knight Brigade.”

Holger was a former mercenary who had changed sides when Fort Volks was occupied. He had apparently been a noble before then and was educated enough to know how to lead a battalion. In truth, Barasco remembered the man well enough, but as a long-serving officer, he had a strong emotional attachment to the Black Knight Brigade. He didn’t take kindly to having a former enemy leading the charge.

“We soldiers of the Empire find honor in fighting and seizing victory with our own two hands,” Barasco said. “But when we join the fray, our foes are already dead.”

“Honor, hm? I can understand why you find it so important. I used to feel the same way.”

“Eh? Are you suggesting that my way of thinking’s outdated?”

Holger chuckled. “No, not at all; I’ve simply lost my nerve. But what can you expect when you find yourself surrounded by barbarians—when your horse and spear are snatched away from you, and you’re forced to spend a month alone in a snowy mountain cave? One naturally becomes a coward. If possible, I would rather not have to experience anything like that again in my life.”

“I...see.”

Holger's words brought rather unpleasant expressions to the faces of the other officers, Barasco included. It was Regis himself who had put the man through so much torment, and the men who had been with the unit longest were more than familiar with what happened to those on the receiving end of the tactician's schemes. Such poor souls were denied the heroic send-offs they desired, and nobody present wanted to meet a similar end themselves.

Regis scratched his head, conscious of all the dubious looks that had gathered on him. "Well, I'll do my best to make sure things aren't that bad," he said. "The enemy has their own schemes, so let's proceed with caution."

"Precisely!" Altina exclaimed, nodding from where she was sitting beside him. "Just because we won yesterday doesn't mean we're guaranteed to win today! Although, I'm just repeating what Regis told me..."

"Aha... Well, they weren't really my words," Regis replied. He was moments away from explaining that the phrase was actually taken from a book he had read, but Altina swiftly moved the conversation along.

"They're certainly late, aren't they?! What could they be doing?!" The time at which they were all scheduled to meet had come and gone, but one of the officers had yet to arrive.

Holger bowed his head. "My apologies. The Thirteenth Army was only recently established, so there is much they are still working out."

"I can understand that, but it seems a bit hypocritical. He gets so furious whenever he's the one left waiting."

"Aha ha... Right..."

"Back during our victory celebrations, he started eating before I'd even arrived."

“He was just, um...hungry, I presume.”

Altina pouted. “I used to think he was trying to spite me, but now I think he’s just a selfish person all around.”

“Now, now...” Regis interjected, attempting to pacify her. The man was still alive and well, and bringing up such anecdotes seemed rather pointless during a war meeting. He lined up the documents before him on the table and then said, “Right. Let us begin with the more trivial details.”

On the table was a large map of the Empire with large game pieces placed upon it. First, Regis took the pieces that were sitting on the capital and distributed them between the north and east.

“Emperor Latrielle has reorganized the army and stationed troops to the north and east. Then, as you are all aware, our unit was moved south.” He placed the piece signifying Altina’s army on the Belgarian-Hispanian border. “There is also the navy to the west, but they are not yet ready. For now, there are three major battlefields.”

From a strategic standpoint, this was a colossal mistake. It was generally advised to avoid a war on two fronts, but here they were dealing with a war on three.

Altina propped up her head with a hand. “Do you think they’ll win, our other armies?”

“They’re still engaging Langobarti to the north. They captured the Langobart king during their last battle, and although his younger brother is now leading the army, our victory is more or less assured.”

“Huh. I didn’t think it would be that easy.”

“It’s because the Langobart Army has already lost most of its core officers and elite knights.”

“And that’s because of you, right, Regis?”

“You have it all wrong. That achievement was purely down to the proficiency of the First Army.” Such was the official story, anyway. Not that it really mattered.

“Well, what about the east?”

“We border various smaller nations to the east, but it seems they’re rallying around Estaburg in their hatred of the Empire,” Regis explained. The previous emperor had taken Princess Juhaprecia as his sixth consort to better international relations, but the resultant peace had now proven to be unfortunately brief. “They lost their first prince in a recent engagement, and their old king is on his sickbed. The second prince has since risen to the top, but at this stage, they’re doing little more than arranging the conditions for their surrender.”

“Truly frightening stuff...” Holger said, speaking as though he had just been told a ghost story. “To think our tactician annihilated the formidable main force of the Estaburg Army without even stepping foot on the battlefield...”

“Huh? No, the Seventh Army deserves the praise for that,” Regis replied. “And the reinforcements from the Fourth Army.”

Holger laughed. “General Coignière and I were merely carrying out the orders given in your letter.”

“You’re giving me too much credit. I simply provided a list detailing a few possible scenarios; the task of selecting which would prove the most effective fell to... In any case, the way I see it, the people who actually charge out and get things done are far more valuable than those who just sit and think.”

“If you say so, Tactician.”

“I’m being honest. Now, where were we... Ah yes, the eastern front. Since the war with Estaburg settled down, a detachment of the Seventh and Fourth Armies—mostly the former Second Army, the

Black Knight Brigade, and a batch of new recruits—were recognized as the Empire’s Thirteenth Army and sent south.”

Just as he paused for breath, a figure barged into the tent—a knight in pitch-black armor. The laid-back atmosphere was torn asunder as the sort of voice that could change the state of a battlefield howled, “Oi, Regis! We don’t have enough meat!”

It was the Black Knight himself, Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt.

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Regis recoiled in the face of such harsh words. “P-Please wait...” he stammered. “I think you’ll find we have plenty of supplies.”

“How many times do I need to tell you?! You can’t raise strong soldiers without meat! You expect me to make something of all that trash without giving me the supplies to feed ’em properly? You’re just gonna end up with soldiers even more useless than they already are!”

There was no denying that Jerome’s unit was something of a hodgepodge, but Regis thought “trash” was a little too harsh. At their core was the Black Knight Brigade, a truly elite force, but the rest were fresh recruits and the soldiers of defeated armies who had suddenly found themselves on an extended expedition. Still, his cruel words aside, the Black Knight had a point; the Thirteenth Army was losing more men to illness and desertion than to battle.

“I’ll do something about it...” Regis conceded.

“Hmph. Next time, sort the problem out before I need to come and yell at you!”

It was then that another individual raced into the tent, panting heavily. “Hah... Hah... Hah... Why did you...leave me behind...?!”

It was Marion.

“Because you’re so slow,” Jerome replied and averted his gaze with a look of displeasure.

“It was time for the meeting and you still hadn’t returned, so I...” All of a sudden, Marion remembered that she was before the *généralissime* and made an effort to correct her way of speaking. “Please pardon our tardiness. The commander and adjutant of the Thirteenth Army are now in attendance.”

Jerome was the commander of the Thirteenth Army, while Marion was serving as his adjutant.

“Looks like you’re getting along well in your new post, Jerome,” Altina said with a bitter smile.

“Think you can mock me now that you’re the *généralissime*, huh? How about we test if your skills are still sharp?”

“You’ll be very surprised to learn that I don’t run out of stamina anymore.”

The two glared at one another until Regis was forced to intervene. “Please, stop this,” he said. “Conquering that fortress takes priority right now.” He unfurled a new map over the table, this one covering Fort Barcedella and the region surrounding it.

Jerome scoffed. “You’ve changed somewhat since the last time I saw you. Back then, when the princess and I would glare at each other like that, you’d always look like you were about to pass out.”

“That’s not true at all...”

It seemed like it had been a long time, but in truth, it was so terribly short. It had all happened only a year ago.

“He’s right,” Altina added. “You’re manlier than you used to be. Only by a little bit, though.”

Was that meant to be a compliment, perhaps?

“I wanted to be a librarian, not a soldier...” Regis muttered despite himself. He then returned to moving strategic pieces around the map on the table, trying to shake the creeping homesickness from his mind.

Chapter 2: Fort Barcedella

“There won’t be any reinforcements?” General Frasier Ruiz González of the Hispanian Army was at his wits’ end.

“His Majesty ordered us to make do with our current forces,” replied the young knight who had delivered the message, bowing his head.

Order or no order, there are some things I just can’t accept!

Frasier cursed to himself, but he made sure not to reveal his true thoughts on the matter. He was unsure how things were elsewhere, but in Hispania, one’s convictions could easily sway one’s position in society. No matter how perfect he appeared to be or how loyal he was to the crown, once his faith in God was placed in doubt, his position could vanish in the blink of an eye.

“In other words,” Frasier said, “His Majesty has full confidence in us and what we are doing.”

“Yes, sir!”

“He has deemed that our forces are sufficient to drive off our Belgian foes.”

“That is correct.”

“Very well. Our situation is as he wills it. May our army march forward with the grace of God.”

“May we carry His grace,” the young knight replied, his hands pressed together in prayer. He bowed to the general and then exited the command room.

Frasier heaved a sigh; then he walked over to the cloth partition dividing the room and peeked behind it. “Mariam... Your prediction was spot-on once again,” he said.

Beyond the partition was a small table, an equally small chair, and a young woman. She was moving various pieces around a chessboard

with her left hand while maneuvering a pen across paper with her right. Frasier checked to see what she had written.

“I heard everything, Father.”

The young woman’s full name was Mariam Ruiz Jiménez—as was customary, she had taken both her father’s family name, Ruiz, and her mother’s family name, Jiménez. She had been born into the household of a high-ranking military officer and possessed a beauty that could easily turn heads. Indeed, under normal circumstances, she would have undergone bridal training and been married off at an early age.

However, Mariam had been born mute.

It was a sinister sign when one could not recite the scripture; had she been born a commoner, perhaps she might have been abandoned. But Frasier was growing old, and she was his first child, so he could not cast her aside. Instead, he kept her in the manor, away from the public eye.

She may not have the happiest life, but I pray only that she lives on.

As a general serving in the army, Frasier was rarely at home. His wife, meanwhile, was often busy with her religious duties; their daughter’s condition had made her a more pious and devoted woman, and she would spend more and more time praying for them both. As a result of their absences, Mariam had ended up being cared for by her grandfather, a retired officer.

During his time in service, Mariam’s grandfather had been known as “the Great Warmaster.” He had been a man who only ever spoke of military matters, but he was Mariam’s entire world up until the day he passed on from old age.

“His Majesty fears Belgaria’s steam engine,” the young woman noted beneath her previous message. She had learned a tremendous deal

from her grandfather, including how to write. Even her penmanship resembled his. At times, Frasier would get the uncanny feeling that she was being possessed by the late officer's spirit.

"His opinions on the steam engine are irrelevant," Frasier replied. "If we allow Barcedella to fall, Belgaria will march all the way to our capital!"

"And therein lies our chance. Belgaria must consider what is to come after this victory. They will attempt to conquer our fortress with as few losses as possible. This naturally limits their methods."

"They have cannons at their disposal. Won't they simply use those?"

"The northern road is within range of our warships; they wouldn't want to risk exchanging fire with us. The ocean is to the east, which leaves the west... A thick forest."

"I agree," Frasier said confidently. "They'll most likely be coming from the forest, then."

Mariam returned one hand to the chessboard. With the other, she wrote: *"Anyone would reach such a conclusion. For that reason, the Belgian commander will opt against it."*

"Why do you say that?"

"I came to understand their commander's personality during the last engagement. Eccentric. Flexible. Thoughtful. Or perhaps it's their tactician."

Frasier gave a sour look as he recalled that crushing defeat. "I didn't think Belgaria's new cannons would be so powerful..." he muttered. "Nobody did."

"On that battlefield, the enemy confronted our formation without any detours or diversions. That should have alerted us to the fact that they had something in store."

Mariam took her pen away from the paper for a moment and sighed. Even that gesture was eerily reminiscent of her grandfather, which

gave Frasier a rather conflicted feeling. Had he taken his daughter to that battlefield, would they have avoided such a crushing defeat? The more he thought about it, however, the more ridiculous the idea seemed. Mariam was unable to speak, yes, but she also found it difficult to move. She had not been raised as a soldier and was incapable of riding a horse, so she would have needed to traverse the roads by carriage. How she would have moved between the trees when they reached the forest, he had no idea.

“Enough about yesterday,” Frasier said. “What do you think about today? They’re not coming from the west, I assume?”

“They’re not.”

“Hm...”

Frasier was no fool. Belgaria could not approach them by sea without ships, which meant there was only one option left—the highway.

“We can expect a night raid. Belgaria will attack after dark without fail.”

“All right. I’ll prepare the soldiers.”

Frasier moved the partition aside, crossed the room, and stepped out into the corridor. “Is anyone here?!” he called, spurring one of his attendants to race over at once.

“Here I am, sir!”

“A night raid. Belgaria will attack after dark without fail,” he declared as confidently as if the realization were his own.

The young aide’s eyes widened. “Is this one of Lady Mariam’s...?”

“Hm? Yes, that’s right.”

The attendant was clearly relieved upon confirming the source of the information. Frasier picked up on this, but he did not press the man—nor did he acknowledge the, “Ooh, the Child of the Lord has

spoken...” that was muttered shortly after. Regardless of what Mariam said, Frasier knew that *he* was the one giving the orders.

“Run!” Frasier shouted. “Gather more torches and lookouts in preparation. Send a message to the admiral at sea to strengthen his surveillance as well.”

“Understood, sir!”

With that, his attendant sprinted down the corridor as quickly as he had come.

Frasier was a dignified man. He had no desire to serve as a carrier pigeon for the Child of the Lord...but at the same time, he recognized that he had fifteen thousand soldiers stationed at the fortress. On such a grave occasion, when they would need to take on forty thousand Belgarians without any hope of reinforcements, dignity was the very least of his concerns.

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It happened three nights later, when the clouds were so thick that not even the moonlight could pass through them. The forest was shrouded in darkness, such that the Belgian soldiers hiding among the trees could not even see their hands in front of their faces. They waited with bated breath; they had reached their positions while the sun was high, but now they could barely move a step for fear of tripping over themselves.

There was a sudden *bang* as a cannon fired from the Belgian side. It was the signal to commence the operation. Tensions flared even higher.

“It’s time.”

Just as rehearsed, the soldiers used a tinderbox to transfer flame to a torch. The roaring fire lit up their surroundings, which eased their

primordial fears...but it was their logical fears that made them tremble next.

Lighting such a conspicuous fire on such a dark night would make them plainly visible to Hispania's warships. The troops were in the forest rather than on the highway, meaning they were currently out of range, but what if the ships ventured closer to shore?

Naturally, the soldiers at Barcedella would notice them as well. Again, the Belgarian troops were at a safe distance, but what if the enemy decided to leave their stronghold? There were fewer than ten men in the forest—not even a platoon. Even the slightest retaliation from the Hispaniards would spell their demise, and it was this fear that forced them to silence.

“What is that tactician thinking?” one whispered.

That tactician is crazy... another handful of soldiers thought to themselves as they worked their oars. They dared not say this aloud, however.

They had taken a small boat made for rivers out on the dark sea and made it all the way to the open waters where Hispania's warships loomed. These warships were furnished with lights to ensure they did not collide with one another, which gave their positions away to the Belgarians as well, so it was relatively simple to stay out of eyeshot...but there was no guarantee that the enemy did not have a lookout with exceptional eyes, nor that the moonlight would not escape the clouds.

The soldiers were drenched in cold sweat. From the sea, Fort Barcedella shone like the enticing flames that lured in unsuspecting moths; it was not a city, but a great many people still resided there. The strong lights of the fort also indicated that they were wary of a night raid, although it seemed that they also expected a drawn-out

siege—they were using their fuel conservatively, only lighting torches where they deemed them necessary.

The roar of a cannon had rung out just a moment ago, and two flames had appeared in the forest a few beats later.

What could this mean?

At the very front of the boat sat their tactician, Regis d’Aurick. “All right. Here should be good enough,” he whispered.

The platoon commander in charge of the boat gave the order to stop rowing. It was too dark to use flags, and there was a chance that the enemy would overhear any whistles or shouts, so the orders were given from the front and then quietly relayed from one rower to the next.

The tactician steadied a strange tool. It was neither a gun nor a crossbow, and there were various notches carved into it.

“Fourteen, five, twenty-one, three...”

Regis read out several numbers, which the guard accompanying him then noted on paper—not that he could see what he was writing.

One of the soldiers pointed toward land. “More lights.”

After the first blast of the cannon, a flame had been lit in the forest. The soldiers had wondered what it meant. Now, several flames dotted the highway—presumably foot soldiers with torches—and they were headed for Fort Barcedella.

“The ships are moving!” one soldier inadvertently cried out, only to be struck silent by those around him. The vessels of the Hispanian Empire slowly drew closer to land, and soon enough, they had opened fire. They were smaller than Belgaria’s ships of the line but were still equipped with powerful cannons.

“Hm...” The tactician nodded. “It seems they have better range than our Type-40 Alains—perhaps because they can shoot from higher up on their decks.”

“Mr. Regis,” his guard said, “would it be possible to attack the fort without torches?”

“If we tried to keep formation in the dark, our men would all trip over one another. It would end up being quite a hassle, to say the least,” Regis replied. “On another night, perhaps the moonlight might have helped, but then we would have been moving in plain sight.” It seemed that he had already considered the option.

“But isn’t that better than being fired upon by naval cannons?”

“Unfortunately, the involvement of the enemy navy was inevitable. Even if we forced the men to march at night, those in Fort Barcedella would only need to shoot a few flame arrows to alert their warships of our location.”

“I see.”

Even the soldiers understood that being bombarded for the entire stretch to the fortress would result in great losses. Still, they had no idea what they were doing on the boat.

“Things are about to get dangerous, Mr. Regis.”

“You’re right. Well, we’ve seen what we came here to see, so let’s call it a day.”

“Turn right,” the platoon leader whispered, immediately relaying the order. These were soldiers and not sailors, so no specialized jargon was used.

Wary of the enemy ships on the prowl, the Belgarians fled the open waters, all the while wondering why they had even gone on the tiny expedition. “I don’t get it...” one even muttered, but they still believed that their tactician was acting with good reason. They

needed to, or else they would surely lose their minds.

Has that tactician finally gone insane?

It was a moonless night, and the foot soldiers had been ordered to run at Fort Barcedella with torches in hand. As expected, the warships at sea opened fire. The shots started out distant, but they gradually came nearer and nearer until, at least, one landed upon their formation. There were screams as a number of men were knocked from their feet or struck by the fragments, leaving them in a truly horrendous state. And yet, the fortress still seemed so distant.

A siege was normally held with so many people that the charge could continue even in the face of cannon fire—they would attack with numbers so great that it would be impossible to defeat them all. However, a mere hundred had been placed on the charge. They had started out believing there was some sort of plan, but this was evidently not the case, and the retreat bugle sounded before they were within range of the fortress's bowmen.

The tactician had undoubtedly gone mad.

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Frasier threw open the door to the room. “Finally awake, Mariam?!”

His daughter was staring absentmindedly out the window, still in her nightgown. She had not even gotten out of bed, although she was at least sitting up, and the breakfast that had been prepared for her two hours prior was sitting on the bedside table.

Mariam reached out, plucked a churro from her plate, and nibbled on the end.

“Mmm. Mmm.”

“Don’t eat in bed!” Frasier exclaimed, gesticulating wildly. “And get changed before you start eating! Now, come on—you really need to get up!”

Mariam squirmed out from under her sheets, holding the churro between her teeth. Her sleepwear, which was quite standard in Hispania, consisted of a light and rather loose nightgown. It simply slipped over the head, and there were no accompanying pants—something that was true for both men and women. In accordance with the temperature, the sleeves and collar could be tightened with buttons or string.



Mariam's nightwear had rolled up to her waist, exposing her lower body and prompting Frasier to cover his eyes. She was at an age when most women would already be married, and her figure spoke to this maturity.

Of course, this was all the more reason why her immodest, shameless conduct unbecoming a young woman made her father quite concerned for her future. To make matters worse, she then immediately began to strip. As her father, Frasier did not particularly want her to be conscious of him as a man, but did she feel no embarrassment whatsoever?

Frasier would often regret having left his daughter's education to her grandfather. He could not help but think that she acted a lot like an eight-year-old boy—when she was, in fact, a woman twice that age.

Mariam painstakingly reached for her blouse. She preferred clothes that she could easily slip on without needing to pay mind to any annoying buttons or fasteners.

"Put some undergarments on first!" Frasier scolded. Instead, the young woman took a pen, some ink, and a sheet of paper from her bedside table and wrote a short message.

"Men don't wear them."

"You're a woman! And consider your age!"

"Aren't you just being stubborn?"

"You're just being irrational! Now, put some clothes on! Do you plan to spend the day naked?!"

"An interesting proposition."

"Grr!" Frasier glared at his rebellious daughter, who merely shrugged and picked out some underwear. She had perhaps as much modesty

as there was morning dew in the drier months, and she turned her back to him as she contained her chest.

Frasier did not make a hobby of watching his daughter change, so his eyes drifted out the window. “Belgaria finally attacked last night,” he noted.

Once her blouse was on, Mariam picked up her pen again. *“I’m mute, not deaf,”* she wrote. *“The cannons kept me up all night.”*

“That’s understandable,” Frasier replied. The soldiers in the fortress were sleep-deprived as well.

“What are our losses?”

“None, so to speak. The Belgarians came at us with torches, so we didn’t even need a scheme to outmaneuver them. The warships scattered them with cannon fire, and they retreated before they could approach the fort.”

Mariam paused for a moment in thought. Frasier assumed it was now safe for him to look, so he glanced over, only to return his gaze to the window. “Down there too,” he said. “Put something on.”

There was no reaction.

“Oi, Mariam?”

Again, she ignored him. Only after she had contemplated the matter for a while longer did she finally put pen to paper again. *“We are dealing with Belgian elites—with the same general who pushed back High Britannia. It is highly suspect that he would lose soldiers for naught.”*

“Everyone makes mistakes every now and again. This general is a human, not God.”

“Father, a commander must always anticipate the worst.”

“Perhaps... But no matter how I look at it, those Belgarians died for nothing. At most, we lost some oil and a few cannon shells.”

“What about our supplies?”

“If we only lose as much as we lost last night, we can hold out another month,” Frasier said, but then it suddenly dawned on him. “There were barely any corpses left on the road. Perhaps there were far fewer Belgarians attacking than we thought.”

“A fake night raid, then.”

“Ah, of course! The Belgian Army intends to attack in small numbers every night to use up all of our cannon shells!”

“No.”

Frasier balked at such a blunt response and then gritted his teeth. “How can you be so certain? Isn’t there still a small possibility?”

“The soldiers would not follow such a foolish plan.”

“Hm...”

Indeed, he could imagine how his own soldiers would react if ordered to get shot at night after night. Reckless commands could be forced on soldiers in the heat of an engagement, but it would be a struggle to maintain their morale for extended periods of time.

Mariam began writing at length. *“Belgaria’s intentions should be no different from what I surmised the other day. The situation hasn’t changed at all, so we can presume they intend to conquer this fortress with as few losses as possible. They must be acting with this in mind.”*

By trying to make the Hispaniards deplete their supplies, the Belgarians would be starting a war of attrition, which was entirely contrary to their objective. Frasier understood this, but he could not think of another explanation.

“In that case...it could be a trap to make us lower our guard. After many botched raids, when we no longer take them seriously, they’ll send their main force. How’s that?”

“Much better than your previous joke.”

“Err, thanks.” Frasier was talking to his own daughter, yet he felt like he was being graded by an academy instructor. He waved his hands to put an end to the conversation. “In any case, we’ll prepare for more raids. We won’t let our guard down. Now wear a skirt, already! And head to the chapel. It’s almost time for prayer.”

There was a moment of stillness as Mariam’s pen hovered above the paper, but then she set it down with a sigh and picked up a skirt. Frasier turned away from her.

Good grief... What goes on in that girl’s head?

If she truly was the Child of the Lord, then the Lord himself must have had a hard time raising her. In sighs alone, the father and daughter were spitting images of one another.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Belgian Army repeated its attacks after dark, but only on nights when there were enough clouds to block the moonlight. This ended up being roughly once every three days.

On the evening before the fifth raid, Barasco, the second-grade combat officer managing the army’s infantry, stormed into the main tent. “You intend to have them charge again tonight?!” he yelled, his face beet red.

There was a massive wooden board on the ground that Regis appeared to be using as a desk. It was fully carpeted with papers, all densely packed with lines of text and numbers. “Ah, please don’t step there,” the tactician said.

“Whoa...” Barasco retreated half a step, but he did not lose any intensity. “Tactician!” he roared. “I demand an explanation! My infantrymen haven’t spent their entire lives training to be sent on such pointless raids!”

“I understand that.”

“If you really do, tell me what your plan is!”

Regis glanced at Barasco and mulled things over for a second. “No need to worry. We’re about to move to the next stage.”

“Are you saying you don’t trust me?!”

Only then did the tactician’s hands stop moving. He looked straight at Barasco from where he was sitting on the ground and said, “Isn’t it more that you don’t trust me?”

“Ah, no...” Barasco winced. He was a long-serving officer who had seen Regis’s plans unfold from the very beginning—he was likely among those who believed in the tactician’s capabilities the most. “B-But, sending my soldiers to die without any explanation... It’s becoming unbearable,” he said, his voice quavering.

Regis set down his pen, stood up, and stared the officer in the eye. “I’m sorry—I really am—but you’ll have to tell them it was the tactician’s orders,” he said. “There’s a chance the soldiers may be taken captive.”

“That’s true...but I wouldn’t reveal the plan to my men.”

“In that case, whether I tell you or not, your words to them will be the same.”

“Gn... Fine.”

A beat later, the opening of the tent was brushed aside, and a girl with crimson hair and red eyes made her entrance. She must have overheard their conversation from outside because, after glancing at Regis, she turned to Barasco and said, “I hear you have some complaints.”

“Ah, no...”

“I understand how you feel,” Altina continued. “If it’s any reassurance, Regis is doing this for your sake.”

“If you’re acting in my best interest, then tell me what the plan is,” Barasco replied. He was unable to conceal his irritation.

Altina’s voice turned remonstrative. “If you knew the plan, would that not change how you address your troops when you send them to their deaths?”

“Huh? That’s—”

“Right now, you have no idea what Regis is thinking. You’re on the same side as your soldiers, and they know that too.”

Barasco nodded. “Certainly, Your Highness.”

“But what if we do tell you the plan? You won’t be able to pass this information on to your men. They’ll march into peril all the same, except in this situation, they’ll know that you’re keeping things from them. Tell me, what would they think of such a commander?”

“Erk...” Barasco could imagine how his troops would feel.

Regis scratched his head. “If we did tell you, I fear it would reflect in your attitude. It would only cause trouble.”

In the same, remonstrative tone, Altina next addressed Regis. “I don’t want you to become the villain here,” she said. “Not everyone is able to bottle up their emotions.”

There was a certain maturity to how the princess was approaching the situation. Indeed, humans who suppressed their feelings for too long were prone to acting irrationally. Regis had to wonder whether he was being a little too impatient, and at the same time, he felt rather moved. A smile played on his lips as he realized that the young woman he was so used to teaching was now warning him.

“As the *généralissime* has stated...perhaps I went too far,” Regis conceded. “It was wrong of me to conceal every little bit of the plan.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Mine too,” Barasco added. “Am I right to assume the night raids have thus far been conducted with unparalleled forethought and thoroughness?”

Regis nodded. He had wanted to question the “unparalleled” part, but he already knew how pointless it was to speak on his own lack of confidence. “If you are to learn of our plan, I need you to make me a promise—the soldiers cannot know even the smallest detail.”

Barasco gave a firm nod, saluted, and declared, “You have my word!” The look in his eyes spoke to the strength of his resolve, but he truly would need to be unwavering—even the slightest sway in his expression would convey some information to the soldiers.

And so, Regis explained a moderate amount of their plan. Barasco was surprised, but he accepted the tactician’s words and exited the tent a short while later.

Regis returned his gaze to the diagrams spread across the floor. “Well, there’s no harm in giving away that much,” he said, “especially now that we’re moving on to the next stage.” Even if what he had just revealed were leaked to the enemy, it would not be enough for them to discern his entire plan.

“Right.” Altina brushed her hair aside. “I’m going to get some sleep, then. We move at midnight, correct?”

“Yeah.”

Regis recalled what Clarisse had told him. He wanted to sit down with the princess for a real conversation, but creating the time to speak with her alone was proving near impossible.

She waved to him. "I'm not a child anymore. I'm not going to get in your way."

"Really? Then how about staying here and taking command tonight?"

A broad smile spread across Altina's lips. "Not. On. My. Life."



That's the one thing that never changes...

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There was a new moon that night, and a curtain of clouds meant that even the stars were a distant memory. The heavens had blessed them with a night of pure darkness, yet when Regis looked to the seas...a chill ran down his spine.

“What is that light...?!”

Just yesterday, only Hispanian warships had stood out over the night sea. They had nothing more than torches to prevent the ships from running into one another. Six ships, six torches. But tonight was different. Now, many more lights dotted the open seas—too many for Regis to count. Surely the enemy had not increased the size of their fleet tenfold, but then what other explanation was there?

As Regis stood glued to the spot, halfway out of the tent, he heard footsteps. Someone was approaching him. There was the quiet, metallic clatter of light armor, and the dim glow seeping out from inside the tent illuminated golden hair.

“Mr. Regis!”

“Oh... Eric.”

Only upon hearing the man's voice was Regis able to figure out who had come over—that was simply how dark it was. And only once they were standing face-to-face was Regis able to make out his expression. Eric looked panicked as he pointed toward the sea.

“They've deployed patrol boats in the open waters! They seem to be on the lookout!”

“What?!”

They foresaw my plan?!

Regis's hands trembled, and his heart began to race. His plan, which had already required so many sacrifices, was now...

He focused on Fort Barcedella, but the most he could make out in the darkness were the lights of the fortress. "What about the highway?!" he asked. "Have they stationed soldiers on the highway too?!"

"We haven't noticed any changes on the highway, and we haven't received any reports. I can't say for sure, though."

Should I call it off...?

Regis gulped. He looked down at Eric, who had now set his rifle on the ground and taken a knee. The sharpshooter kept his head down, awaiting an order, but Regis was unsure what to say. If their plan truly had been seen through, there was a chance they would face devastating losses.

After nervously running his fingers through his hair, Regis forced the words from his throat. "The plan is..."

All of a sudden, he heard more footsteps. These were far heavier than Eric's had been; it sounded as though a heavily armored soldier were carrying a cannon on their back. A red-haired girl soon entered the glow of the lantern, a sword longer than she was tall slung over her shoulder.

"It's almost time."

"Altina..."

Her eyes widened as she heard the tactician's struggling voice.

"What's wrong, Regis?!" she asked.

"The plan was... No, but... If we were..."

As the princess had said, it was nearly time to begin, but Regis was struggling to even form a sentence. Was it too late to call everything off...? Their land unit would probably receive the order in time, but

those who were taking to the sea had most likely done so already. Regis was overcome with an intense dizziness; he felt as though he might collapse at any moment.

Altina raced over and grabbed the tactician by the shoulder. "Get a grip!" she shouted.

"...?!"

"I believe in you, Regis!"

Even in the meager light, Regis could make out her eyes. There was something dazzling within the deep crimson. He swallowed his breath, and his chaotic thoughts gradually became clearer.

"I'm sorry..." he eventually said.

"Tell me what's on your mind."

His eyes turned to the coast. "Naval forces are usually independent from those on land and follow a separate command structure. Hispania is keeping a particularly close eye on its waters tonight, but whether this search is being conducted of the naval commander's own volition or has been coordinated with Fort Barcedella..."

"You can't say?" Altina ventured, finishing his sentence.

"I can't. But, in truth, it doesn't matter either way. I've been so busy dwelling on options A and B that I've completely overlooked C. Of course, there's also the question of whether there's any use in worrying at all. It's a common pattern in stories."

Assuming that the enemy really was sharing information, it did not matter who was leading the charge. Hispania's naval surveillance had grown more strict, and although the fortress had yet to take action, they were surely in the know as well.

"They've seen through my plan," Regis concluded.

Altina's expression turned grim. "Are you sure?"

Regis shook his head. “If they do know what we’re up to, I don’t see why they would focus on the sea; there are several other things they could have done that would have been more effective. I don’t think they’ve worked out our entire plan, but they realized that we intend to start by water.”

The enemy had presumably figured out what was going on by instinct. Had they been working from gathered intelligence, Regis thought, they would have reacted much differently.

“Are we all right?” Altina asked.

“Unfortunately...we aren’t.”

“Huh?”

Altina was flustered, but Regis needed to analyze the situation with a level head. “My plan would have us lay the groundwork by sea,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?” Altina asked as she and Eric gazed across the waters. They could see the lights of the warships and patrol boats, but nothing else.

“I intended to pour oil across the ocean and set it ablaze...but the situation does not allow for that anymore.”

“Definitely not,” the princess agreed. Under so many watchful eyes, there was no way they could pull off such a stunt.

“And if our first gambit is impossible,” Regis continued, “the mission needs to be called off. My plan has failed.”

“That can’t be...”

“But...this is one of *your* plans!”

Altina and Eric both voiced their surprise.

Am I approaching this rationally? Regis asked himself. I’m not panicking, right? I haven’t become a coward again, have I...?

The battlefield made Regis immensely anxious. He was constantly worried that he was losing his sanity, but he still needed to make a decision.

“Shall I convey that message?” Eric asked.

Regis was about to nod, but then he paused. “No, I should be the one to do that.” He had to take responsibility for their unfortunate situation.

Altina pointed to the highway, where the foot soldiers had gathered and were awaiting the signal. “Then the responsibility lies with me,” she said. “I’ll tell everyone.”

“I’m the one who failed...”

“But I’m the one who left everything to you.”

“No—”

“I’ll make it quick!” Altina declared, interrupting Regis before he could even attempt a rebuttal and then marching off. She carried a sword that even a well-built man would struggle to lift, but she moved as though it weighed nothing at all.

“W-Wait for me!” Regis pleaded, but his cries fell on deaf ears. Left with little choice, he chased after the princess, with Eric matching his pace beside him.

“Everyone understands, Mr. Regis.”

Do they really? The survivors might understand, but what of the dead? Will all the soldiers who gave their lives for this plan feel the same way?

Regis cupped a hand over his mouth. He felt nauseous.

Where did I go wrong? Was I too naive? Is the enemy commander really acting on instinct? If so, I should have accounted for it. The blame rests entirely on my shoulders.

“This is my mistake...” he muttered.

And then, a bright flash of red caught his eye. It was so brilliant that he inadvertently froze, and the very air seemed to quiver.

“Huh?!”

Regis, Altina, and Eric all stared toward the sea.

Thirty minutes prior—

The foot soldiers of the Fourth Army’s ninth division were already at sea, divided among twelve small rowboats made to be used on rivers. Each boat was towing along a barrel of oil that floated surprisingly easily across the water, despite how much of a struggle they were to hoist over land. The men had been instructed to judge the direction of the current and ensure that the oil, once released, would flow toward the Hispanian warships.

Although he kept his voice down, the deputy captain’s exasperation was palpable as he said, “Captain! Enemy patrol boats!” The soldiers gripping the oars had noticed this as well, and they immediately began to stir.

“What are those?”

“They just keep coming...”

“Aren’t they warships?”

The captain kicked a few of the soldiers closest to him in an attempt to silence them; since the ninth division was on a secret mission, a verbal admonishment simply wasn’t an option. The appearance of so many patrol boats was beyond not only his expectations but also the scope of the plan. They had gone out to sea the night before with the tactician on board. On that night, they had watched the futile charge that had taken place on land—which the captain still failed to grasp the meaning of—and there had only been the large warships.

“Captain,” the deputy said, “has the enemy discerned our intentions?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then we should abandon the mission.”

The deputy had a point—with surveillance this thorough, trying to approach with barrels of oil was downright suicidal. However, the captain had received a short briefing from his commander, Barasco. Although he hadn’t been told the finer details, he knew there was a plan—a plan to conquer Fort Barcedella with the fewest possible casualties.

“It needs to happen tonight.”

“Captain?”

“Barasco told me this plan can only be executed in complete darkness, and when else could that be but tonight?”

“That’s true, but... Our tactician is good at what he does. Even if this plan fails, he’ll surely think of another.”

“Maybe, but preparing something new will take twice as long.”

Forty thousand soldiers were involved in the expedition; the food, necessities, and medical supplies expended each day could rival what was needed to sustain a small city on the border. To make matters worse, the nearest outpost was Sembione, and their supply line was over a week long. A large-scale campaign was a battle for provisions, and the more goods that were lost, the closer Belgaria would be to its defeat. Such were the reasons for the captain’s next declaration.

“We will carry out our mission.”

“Huh?!” His deputy stared at him with wide eyes, and the other soldiers were soon to follow. He could feel their growing discontentment—they were probably thinking it was a foolish move—but even so...

“I understand that it sounds unreasonable,” the captain said, “but if we give up here, we’ll never reach the Hispanian capital. Our entire expedition will end in failure.”

“B-But—”

“We are soldiers of the Empire, here by the order of the *généralissime*. If we turn back, what excuse can we offer to Her Highness and the other units? That we fled because we were outnumbered?”

“Erk...”

The soldiers exchanged glances—this certainly was an unexpected situation. They would not be punished for their retreat, but their honor was on the line.

“Our subversive actions are the key to conquering that fortress,” the captain continued. “Our allies are counting on us to throw the first stone. Do you want them to sneer at us, knowing that the ninth division turned tail in the face of a few extra opponents?”

Upon hearing those words, the soldiers’ expressions changed. The unrelenting darkness meant the captain could only see the faces of those closest to him, but there was no mistaking it—these were the faces of men heading out to war.

“We stick to the plan, Captain!” the deputy announced with newfound resolve. There were no objections from the other troops.

“By land or sea, it doesn’t matter!” the captain said. “We’ll get out there and show ’em what we can do!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Right. All hands, move out!”

As the men began to row, the captain signaled the other rowboats using a specially made lantern that was covered on all sides but one, such that its light only shone in a single direction. The other boats

were taken aback by the changing situation, but none had attempted to flee on their own; most of the soldiers of the ninth division had been around since the days of the Beilschmidt border regiment, and they believed that the Hispaniards in their ships were nothing to fear compared to training under the Black Knight.

The men could not raise their usual manly cries, and they were gripping oars instead of spears, but they pressed on all the same. Twelve boats approached the various positions the tactician had designated, having spent the past three days looking into them. Of course, this was easier said than done—there were no landmarks to be seen, and the darkness was so absolute that one’s own legs would seem to fade away when one stood. All the captain could see was the torches—the lights looming over every warship, and the lights from Fort Barcedella. The unmoving fortress was like a lighthouse, which they needed to use to orient themselves.

“Is it around here?” the deputy asked.

“Should be.”

The lights of the patrol boats came and went; it seemed that the ninth division had yet to be spotted.

“Empty the barrels.”

At the captain’s order, those sitting at the rear of each boat started pulling in the oil. The sloshing of the water sounded so terribly loud. Once the barrels were within reach, the stoppers keeping them sealed were removed, and their contents were poured out. Had it been midday, the men would have seen the clear blue waters stained with a sticky black substance, but this was unnoticeable in the darkness. All that gave away their actions was the foul smell that now mingled with the scent of the ocean.

According to the plan, it would take around an hour for the contents of the barrels to move along the currents and reach the enemy ships. The men sat in silence, waiting for that time to pass.

All of a sudden, the deputy stood. “One of the patrol boats is coming straight for us!” he exclaimed. “We’ve been spotted!”

“Damn it! Cut the tow rope!” the captain ordered. “Retreat at full speed!”

In each boat, one man pulled out a knife and cut through the tow rope to discard their oil. The other men then frantically worked their oars to get their boats moving. No matter how much they exerted themselves, however, these were riverboats reliant on manpower—and the manpower of very inexperienced seamen, at that. Hispania’s small sailing ships were overwhelmingly faster, and the distance between them was decreasing by the second.

«It’s a boat!» a foreign voice cried out. «Belgarians!»

Although the captain had never studied Hispanian, it shared a common root language with Belgarian and was only as different as a regional dialect. He could understand what was being said as a result, and what he heard was harrowing.

«Fire! Don’t let them get away!»

“Bastards... Hurry up. They’re gaining on us!” the deputy shrieked. He glanced over his shoulder. “They’re nocking flaming arrows, Captain!”

“Those crazy...!”

The arrows were loosed, but not a single one was able to hit the small rowboats. Instead, the flame-tipped projectiles dropped into the pitch-black sea—into a sea coated with a layer of oil.

In an instant, the waters lit up as though the sun had suddenly risen. Everything was ablaze. The flames reached even as far as the yet-

empty barrels, and an explosion followed not even a beat later. The pursuing boat seemed to take the brunt of the impact—a huge wave smacked against its side, and while it did not capsize, the flame had transferred to its sail. Putting out the fire was near impossible in such a small vessel, and so the Hispanian soldiers were forced to jump into the flaming sea as a result of their own arrow.

This grand spectacle caught the attention of the other Hispanian patrol boats, but giving chase was no longer possible. Far from being scot-free, however, the ninth division was still in quite a predicament—its boats were having to traverse a sea of flames in the most literal sense. Taking in the burning air would scorch the men’s lungs, but rowing without breathing was brutally exhausting even for trained soldiers.

The oars and the hull, which were both drenched in oil, soon caught fire as well. The parts still under the water would presumably survive, but that wasn’t much of a comfort when the soldiers would end up burning to death.

“Abandon ship!” the captain ordered.

The men of the ninth division all took the plunge, fully resolved to endure the flames...

“Bwah?!”

...but when the captain surfaced, he could feel none of the overwhelming heat he had expected. Right as he had given the order, the boat had evidently drifted out of the oil slick.

“Fwah!” The deputy popped up a moment later with a loud gasp.

“Gah... Hah...”

“Are you alive?” the captain asked.

“Yes! I’m glad you’re all right, Captain!”

“I wouldn’t say I’m all right just yet. I think I might be going crazy...”

“Huh?”

The captain offered no response; instead, he gestured toward the land. The deputy turned to look, and what he saw put him in a daze.

“What...is going on?”

“Do you see anything strange?”

“Yes. Two things, in fact.”

“Then I’m not the only one.”

The arrangement of torches that the soldiers recognized as Fort Barcedella was still there, but now there was an identical arrangement right beside it. One fortress had suddenly become two.

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Regis could only watch as a tremendous explosion flared on the ocean, setting its surface ablaze. “Is this really happening?!” he exclaimed.

Altina, who was standing a few steps ahead of him, stopped and turned around. “Isn’t this going according to plan?”

“I-It’s not quite what I expected, but... It works.”

“That’s good to hear!”

“Still, this is impossible...” Regis muttered. “How could the ninth division have carried out their task without any of the patrol boats spotting them?” He produced a pocket watch from his breast pocket, but it was too dark outside for him to read the time. Not even the light from the blazing sea provided any assistance, since it was too far from the shore. Perhaps he was better off returning to the tent and making use of the lantern there.

“What’s wrong?” Altina asked.

“I wanted to know the time. It might be too early for us to enact the mission.”

“It *is* a little early...” Altina replied simply. She never carried a watch, but her internal clock was quite precise. They really must have been ahead of schedule.

“Something must have happened...” Regis said. He had a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Mr. Regis!” Eric shouted, suddenly pointing at the highway. “Look!”

As everyone was focused on the blazing sea, a great many torches were lit where the Belgian soldiers had gathered. These lights weren’t in the same neat, orderly lines as the night before; instead, they looked disjointed and irregular.

“Is it okay for our men to be lighting torches?” Eric asked, sounding anxious. “Won’t the warships open fire again...?”

Regis had asked for Eric’s assistance in enacting his plan, but he hadn’t given him the details. In fact, Altina was just about the only person to have been told everything. She pointed toward the lights, brimming with confidence, and said, “It’s all right! Don’t the positions of our torches remind you of something?”

“I’m...not following.”

“Look over there.”

Eric squinted in an attempt to see better, and then—“Ah!”—he cried out in understanding. “It looks just like the fortress!”

“You see it now, then.”

“From the warships’ perspective, does it look like there are two Barcedellas side by side?”

Regis nodded. “As long as the warships don’t start firing, we can consider this a success.”

“So, this is why you were taking notes from the sea...”

“I also needed to investigate the currents. Incidentally, I drew a line between the torches in the forest and used that as my measuring stick for which lights had to go where, both horizontally and vertically.”

It was in accordance with Regis’s notes that the foot soldiers were holding their torches, having been ordered to light them as soon as the ocean caught fire. Regis had intended to call the mission off entirely, but the flames had ignited sooner than expected, and as a result, the plan was already starting to take shape.

“I don’t know what to say...” Eric muttered, staring at the lights of the nonexistent second fortress.

“By doing this,” Regis explained, “the Hispanian ships shouldn’t attack or approach.”

Eric cocked his head. “That’s strange... Would they not come closer to find out which one is the fake?”

“Coming too close would put them in range of our Type-40 Alains, and in an exchange of cannon fire, we’re more or less invincible.”

The Hispaniards were aboard flammable wooden ships, had cannons that were closely packed together, and used torches that immediately revealed their position. The Belgarians, in contrast, were on unsinkable land, had cannons that were spread apart, and were able to hide away in the darkness. The exchange would presumably be one-sided.

“Oh, I see it now!” Eric announced.

“The plan had one critical weakness, though—if our enemy had seen us light the torches, it would have been obvious which fortress was fake.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

“That’s why we set fire to the ocean—the flames served to momentarily distract the enemy ships.”

“Sure enough!” Eric replied. In this particular circumstance, the explosion had made their distraction even more effective.

“I don’t know what happened out at sea, but the ninth division made sure our plan was a success,” Regis concluded. Had they failed, the enemy warships would have started firing upon the false fortress and the Belgian soldiers.

“As long as they keep their torches out and in position, they can charge at Fort Barcedella without being fired upon!” Altina added, her voice overcome with enthusiasm.

Regis was pleased to know that the princess fully comprehended the plan. She wasn’t simple by any means, but back when they had first met, she had tended to give up on thinking entirely. Now, in contrast, she was actually putting in the effort to understand. Regis would have nothing but praise for her, so long as she learned to stay somewhere safe when she took command.

Altina headed for the lines of soldiers ready to charge. She wasn’t going to be standing among the vanguard this time, but Regis grew anxious nonetheless. Although the enemy ships would not attack them, the fortress had cannons as well. Being on the receiving end of a bombardment wasn’t quite as unlikely as he hoped.

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A wave of concern had spread through Fort Barcedella. They had expected the Belgians to attack in large numbers, so the torches illuminating the highway to the south came as no surprise, but why had their warships not yet opened fire?

Barcedella had plenty of cannons at its disposal, but with how much Hispania prioritized its navy over bolstering its forts, they were considerably older models. They were outmatched in range,

firepower, and reload time when compared to the cannons the invading Belgarians had with them. The disparity was so great, in fact, that the Hispaniards wouldn't have the advantage even when firing from atop the walls, and their situation was only made worse considering that their foe was approaching under cover of darkness.

«Charge! Charge!» came the Belgian voices.

“Why aren't the ships firing?!” the captain of the south gate's garrison bellowed, staring at the countless torches from where he stood atop the fort walls.

“We don't know!”

A great explosion had shaken the air, and a large fire was visible out at sea. It was too far away for them to be able to see what had actually happened. Perhaps Belgaria's warships had finally entered the scene...although there hadn't been anywhere near enough cannon shots for that to have been the case.

“Send out a messenger!” the captain shouted at his soldiers. “Tell the fleet to open fire! The enemy is approaching from the south!”

During the day, the Belgarians had set up camp on the north side, but it seemed they had taken advantage of the darkness to gather on the south. Was that why the admiral was so hesitant?

Of course, the captain of the garrison would never have guessed the true reason for the navy's inaction—that Belgaria's torches had taken on exactly the same shape as the fortress. From the sea, it looked as though there were suddenly two forts slowly merging into one another, and the torchlight seemed so faint that it was impossible to say which side was moving.

It was the Belgian Army that took the first shot, striking the ramparts with cannon fire. Those stationed in the fortress began to panic; the Hispanian Army lacked experience in large-scale land battles, and its garrisons were especially untried.

“Quit yapping!” the captain cried out. “They’re not upon us yet! Return fire! Return fire!”

The cannoneers received their orders and started to prepare their counterattack. Each cannon had an entire team behind it.

“Load!” the gunnery officer instructed.

“Yes, sir!” came the response from the loader as they inserted a charge.

Hispania’s cannons were all front-loaded and required a sack of gunpowder to be inserted through the muzzle and shoved all the way in using a ramrod. A round cannonball would then be added, again through the muzzle, and an awl would be poked through a thin hole in the breach, rupturing the gunpowder sack and making the cannon ready to fire.

After covering his ears in preparation, the officer shouted, “Fire!”

There was a second cry of, “Yes, sir!” as another soldier held a long torch to the cannon’s fuse. Barely a moment passed before the flame traveled down the vent and the powder ignited, causing the charge to explode. The resultant boom shook the air, and an iron sphere shot from the copper barrel at tremendous speed. The cannon was thrown backward at the same time; it was mounted on wheels, so it shifted a great distance along the stone walls.

It was too dark for the men to tell where the shot had actually landed. They could only assume that several Belgarians were dead.

“Next round!” the officer shouted. “Load!”

Before the team could prepare for another shot, however, twice as many shells as they had fired came crashing down on them from the Belgian side. The floor beneath the cannon crumbled away as huge gouges were made in the fortress’s walls. It was an extraordinary

amount of damage—especially to the Hispaniards, whose cannons could do little more than chip away fragments when fired at stone.

Naturally, the flying debris from the Belgarians' attack meant more injuries among the Hispaniards. The severity depended entirely on where they were struck—those wounded in the arms or legs were treatable, those wounded in the head were almost guaranteed a quick death, and those wounded in the stomach... Well, such men either pulled through by the skin of their teeth or died the most painful death imaginable.

Several reports came to the captain, but one in particular stood out to him: "Our cannoneers are suffering heavy losses from Belgaria's artillery!"

"What do you mean?!" the captain barked.

"We think they're aiming at the torches we use to ignite our cannons, sir!"

It all seemed so absurd—the older cannons were entirely incapable of such precision, but because the new cannons had grooves carved into their barrels that added spin to the fired shells, they were able to shoot in a much straighter line. This meant that, when firing from a distance at which an older cannon could accurately strike a house, a new cannon was exact enough to consistently break its windows. That was how drastically superior the new models were.

The cannons that High Britannia had produced and the Empire had imitated were yet to reach Hispania, meaning that most of the Hispanian soldiers were seeing them for the very first time. Although they had mainly paid attention to their range, there were other points such as firepower and accuracy that needed to be considered as well.

Breech-loaded cannons did not require a torch to be ignited. Instead, what was inserted through the vent was a cylindrical detonator with

a pull cord. Less force escaped through the plugged vent, which was one of the reasons for the higher firepower.

Fort Barcedella had the terrain advantage and possessed more cannons, but the Belgarian Army surpassed them in their technologies and the proficiency of their cannoners. This only became more striking when the fortress came within range of the Belgarian cannons; damages became too great for the Hispaniards to even maintain a counterattack.

“What happened to the archers?!” the captain shrieked. “Are they asleep?!”

“Th-There aren’t any...!” the messenger replied, his breath ragged. His skin was of an extreme pallor, but there wasn’t enough light for the captain to notice; he was deliberately standing in darkness to ensure the cannons wouldn’t take aim at him.

“What?”

“They’re gone!” the messenger wailed. “The commander, the officers, even the allied soldiers! Not a single one remains!”

“What...did you say...?!”

The captain and the nearby soldiers were at a loss for words. Belgaria’s attack had only just begun, and while the Hispaniards were at a disadvantage, they hadn’t yet been pushed over the brink. If they could just relay the enemy’s position to the fleet, they would be able to overturn the situation with a naval bombardment.

A conspicuously louder sound echoed through the fortress.

“What is it now?!” the captain yelled.

The soldiers pointed at the gate. “They broke down the gate with their cannons!” one shouted.

The captain felt as though the ground beneath him had turned to gelatin. Belgaria's bombardment had ceased, which could only mean one thing...

A troupe of men clad in pitch-black armor stormed into the fortress. «Hraaah!» one of them roared. «Come at me if you want to die!»





Prior to the explosion—

Frasier was on the balcony of the fortress's command room. It was usually a marvelous spot from which he could appreciate the tasteful architecture and the vivid ocean, but now, he could see nothing but ominous darkness.

And then, fire spread over the water.

Is the enemy fleet attacking? Frasier wondered. It seemed an unlikely explanation; he could not hear the sounds of ships exchanging fire.

His musing was suddenly interrupted as someone struck him on the back.

“Whoa?!”

He reached for his sword, certain that it was a surprise attack...but when he turned, he found it was simply his daughter. The dim lighting revealed that she was in her nightgown, so she had presumably come straight from her room farther down the corridor. Frasier could only imagine the looks on the guards' faces when they had seen her pass.

Frasier let out a long sigh. “Mariam, when you leave your room—”

“Gnn!”

Before he could even begin chastising her, however, she began straining her nonfunctioning voice and pointing.

“What's wrong?”

Frasier had enough common sense to guess that Mariam had something important on her mind, so he decided to put aside the

matter of her nightgown for the time being. He followed her finger, and that was when he saw it—the great arrangement of torches.

Since when have those been there?! Did they appear while I was staring at the explosion?!

“So, the Belgarians are coming...” Frasier muttered.

It’s just as we discussed—they’re swarming us after having lowered our guard.

Little did the Belgarians know, the garrisons were as prepared as ever. And even if they came with impressive numbers, the ships at sea would gun them down.

Except there was still no bombardment to be heard.

Frasier looked to the sea and said, “Why aren’t they firing?” It was a moonless night, so he couldn’t make out the ships all too clearly, but their torches were lit, and they seemed to be afloat. In fact, they were already close enough for their cannons to reach the Belgian invaders. “What’s stopping them?!”

“Mnn!”

Mariam tugged at Frasier’s sleeve and started dragging him back into the room. For her sake, he always had a pen and some paper ready on his desk.

“What do you think happened, Mariam?”

“Father, I think we have to abandon the fort.”

“What?!”

“Hurry! I can explain after you’ve given the order.”

Frasier mussed up his hair. “No, wait! Hold on! His Majesty himself entrusted me with this fortress! And besides, it’s meant to be impregnable! As long as we have our navy there to protect us, the Belgarians could surely...never...approach...”

He was midsentence when he realized that the warships were still silent. And without naval reinforcement, the fortress was no better than any old dwelling. It had been fashioned in the age of archers, and if the Belgarians opened fire with their latest cannons, its walls and gates would not hold out for long.

Mariam slapped the line she had already written, urging Frasier to order a retreat.

“Grr... Accursed Belgarians!”

His daughter must have noticed something—a reason they had no choice but to abandon the fort. Frasier headed to the corridor to deliver his order, but a sudden realization seemed to stop him in his tracks. He turned around and said in a commanding voice:

“Mariam! Put some proper clothes on!”

Of the fifteen thousand soldiers stationed in Fort Barcedella, two thousand were left behind to delay the invaders. The majority escaped through the western gate.

Chapter 3: Carriage in the Snow

The imperial army overran Fort Barcedella in the night, defeating and capturing a great many soldiers. Setting up base in the fortress was not an option—Hispania’s ships were intact, and their powerful cannons could easily reduce the structure to rubble—so the Belgarians withdrew before the break of dawn. To avoid any troubles that would result from the Hispaniards returning and trying to reclaim the fortress, they had demolished its walls with the use of gunpowder.

The next day—

As the army marched on, specks of white began to float down from the sky. Regis pressed a cheek to his carriage’s window, trying to get a better look. “Snow...?”

“Even though we’re quite far south...” Clarisse muttered in the seat across from him. She sounded rather surprised—a sign that she was more educated than she let on.

“As far as I’m aware,” Regis said, “it’s been six years since it last snowed in Hispania.”

“Well, it *is* winter, I suppose.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s coming down heavily enough to settle.”

“It’s not particularly cold out either.”

“Not compared to northern Belgaria, at least.”

“Although, we *are* sitting in a carriage...” Clarisse added with a smile.

“You have a point,” Regis said, taking her meaning. “The soldiers are going to resent us if we make them march through this.” He rode by carriage mainly because he was hopeless on horseback, but pushing the soldiers too hard from the comfort of the indoors would only

earn him their ire. Altina was the commander of the unit, but most of the men knew that the tactician was the one who devised the plans.

Regis looked at the map, searching for a safe spot. There were thankfully no large hills from which arrows could rain, nor were there any narrow paths that would prevent them from adequately protecting their headquarters. The terrain was, on the whole, quite favorable; there was nothing that would impede their scouts and put them at risk of an ambush or encirclement. Such grounds where they might have to engage the enemy at a moment's notice were known as desperate land.

Of course, Regis was not lucky enough to find the perfect place to set up camp, but somewhere with few enough points of concern would do—so long as he stationed the appropriate lookouts and sentries.

After deciding on a spot, Regis set the map down, opened the carriage window, and called, "Princess!" She had coincidentally been passing by at that very moment, so he suddenly found himself sitting face-to-face with her.

Regis's cheeks turned red. Rumors told that Altina had been envied and even driven from the capital due to her looks. At fourteen years of age, she had been beautiful enough to lend credence to such gossip, but now...she was like a goddess from a mural.

"What's wrong, Regis?" Altina asked with a frown. "Didn't you call me for something?"

"Ah!" the tactician exclaimed. "That's right; we need to take a break."

Altina nodded. "I was just about to propose the same thing."

Both Regis and Altina looked up at the sky, which was overcast with thick gray clouds. It was no wonder that the moon and stars had gone unseen the night before. The snow was picking up.

There were guards around, so Regis adopted a more cordial tone. “I have decided on a location,” he said. “There’s a place where the road meets the river a little farther down. We should find a small village there.”

“A village...” Altina repeated in a low voice.

“According to our scouts, there shouldn’t be any Hispanian soldiers stationed there.”

Perhaps the village had a small garrison or militia to maintain the peace, but it was unlikely that such men would bare their fangs against the forty thousand soldiers of the Belgarian Army. Up to this point, they had occupied many similar Hispanian towns without the need for any bloodshed. Most of the residents would flee before the army even arrived. Those who remained often had reasons for doing so, such as illness, injury, or old age.

Altina nodded again. “If that’s what you’ve decided, Regis.” She called a messenger over and had them relay an order to the commanders of every division: the Belgarian Army was to march for a village so small it was not even on the map.

Regis had a separate messenger follow up with more details and offered some supplementary commands. “Send scouts ahead to patrol the forest,” he said. “Also, take a boat out on the lake and... Actually, come to think of it, do you think we can buy some in the village?”

The previous night’s plan had effectively wiped out their meager fleet of riverboats. Around half of the soldiers who had taken to the water returned, but their boats had either burned up or were covered in oil. They were low on food and bullets as well.

We should meet up with the supply unit soon, but until then...

Regis began calculating on his fingers.

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“So...you’re not going to surrender?” Regis asked, tilting his head quizzically. They had been about to arrive at the village when a young man who did not even seem to be a soldier approached their headquarters. The army had come to a halt, regarding him as an envoy.

“I am Damia Ortho Posada, the mayor of Lokates.”

The man looked young, but he was evidently the village’s representative. Soldiers clad in heavy armor quickly surrounded him upon learning this, and Altina came to address him personally.

“Well met. I am Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, the *généralissime* of the Belgarian Army.”

Regis stood at the princess’s side without introducing himself.

“Lokates will never bend to heretics,” Damia boldly declared. “If you wish to pass by, so be it. But we will not allow you into our village.”

The officers managed to contain their amusement, but there were snickers from the soldiers. *They’d normally be severely rebuked for such discourtesy...but I can’t even blame them*, Regis thought.

Lokates had a meager population of around three thousand, and it was too small to even warrant its appearance on maps. Furthermore, according to the scouts, it had no standing army...yet its people were still daring to refuse the Empire.

“We’ve occupied a few Hispanian settlements and given them all fair treatment,” Altina said. “I can guarantee that you’ll receive the same.”

Damia shook his head. “It’s not about how we’re treated. Belgarians are from the North Sect, correct? We do not recognize your teachings.”

“So, this is about religion...?” Altina glanced at Regis. He had intended to speak as little as possible during this exchange, but an explanation was necessary.

“Aside from a few exceptions—such as Etruria, for instance—most countries on the continent follow the same religion,” Regis began.

“So, both Belgaria and Hispania share the same beliefs, right?”

“Wrong!” Damia snapped, suddenly in a frenzy. “You people of the North Sect sold your souls to the devil! Only we follow the true will of our Lord!”

“Huh?” Altina was startled. “I know there are different sects, but...”

“The High Sect is the predominant group in Hispania,” Regis said, continuing his explanation. “Many of its followers do not recognize those of other sects.”

“How are they any different?”

“In their ceremonies and customs, for one thing.”

“Hmm...”

“For instance—on Saint’s Day, we sing psalms and share in a celebratory feast, right?”

“We do!” Altina replied. “It’s like a festival.”

“Those of the High Sect prohibit singing and fast for the entire day.”

“Huh?!”

“As any true believer would,” Damia interjected with a grimace. “The saint spent the day without food or drink to converse with the Great God above. How can you besmirch his sacrifice with your gluttony?! Demons, the lot of you!”

Altina scratched her head. “Uh...why *do* we feast, again?”

Regis was hesitant to answer—revealing that an old ruler had simply co-opted stories of the saint to justify giving the people a much-needed breather would only further incite the zealous High Sect follower. Instead, he decided to redirect the topic of conversation. “Well, talking about religion won’t get us anywhere. We can’t keep the soldiers waiting in the snow.”

“Ah, right!”

“We never intended to stay long, and we don’t plan to occupy any of the houses,” Regis said to Altina. “We don’t even need to enter the village.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?”

“Not as long as they demonstrate their submission to the Empire.”

“I see.” Altina nodded and turned to Damia. “If you agree to accept Belgarian rule, I will protect the safety and assets of your people. You will be our precious subjects, after all.”

“Belgaria is a land of impious Northerners,” Damia sternly replied.

“Not exactly. We have all sorts of religions.”

The Empire had grown by merging with foreign lands—a feat that would most likely not have been possible had they attempted to suppress the absorbed territories’ beliefs. Although the North Sect was the main denomination in Belgaria, nobody was pressured to adopt it. This explanation proved unsatisfactory, however.

“We could never follow a Norther emperor,” Damia spat. “We are the ones who pass down the true gospel. Glory to the emperor of the Hispanian Empire!”

Altina seemed taken aback. After so many successful encounters, she had never even imagined that someone could stand so firmly against the idea.

Regis sighed. “Hispania’s northern settlements secretly trade with other countries and see the occasional traveler, so they’re more open-minded.” Some of those from the northern territories had come from foreign lands to begin with, so they were more than willing to fall under Belgarian rule in the case of a full-blown invasion—especially knowing that Altina’s expeditionary force never slaughtered or plundered. “But the closer we get to the central regions, the more likely we are to meet people who only recognize other Highers.”

Latrielle, the Belgarian emperor, was a Norther; many in Hispania would never pledge allegiance to him.

“The North Sect consists of demons who pervert the words of our Lord,” Damia ranted. “We will never submit!”

“Then what will you do if our soldiers approach your village?” Altina asked.

“We will wage a holy war! The absolute truth is on our side!”

The soldiers began clamoring. Belgaria’s military took pride in its strength; it was understandable that some of the troops were enraged to hear the representative of such a small village suggest that he could defeat them.

One of the officers who had observed the exchange—Second-Grade Combat Officer Barasco, captain of the infantry—stepped forward. “If your entire village declares war upon us, the women and children will be treated as combatants as well,” he said. “Your Excellency, please allow my unit to handle it.”

“Hmm...” Altina fell into a pensive silence. The town’s residents were civilians, not soldiers, but they would not yield to Belgaria, no matter the terms. They had even gone as far as to proclaim they would take up arms in resistance. Not long ago, her first instinct would have

been to ask Regis for his thoughts on the matter...but now she was desperately racking her brain.

And so, the tactician waited.

Damia, the young man who had firmly shown his resolve, awaited the princess's verdict with clenched teeth. He was drenched in sweat, despite all the snow coming down. This was only natural, considering that he had just challenged the commander of an invading nation.

Altina was giving the matter so much thought because she believed in pacifism and wished to side with the people, but any other Belgian officer would have entrusted things to Barasco without a second thought. A town of three thousand would crumble before the main force even arrived. Would she mercifully overlook those who flew the banner of rebellion against the Empire, then? For as much as that seemed to be a peaceful resolution, it would make her appear unsuited for her commanding role—if those in the Hispanian capital were just as defiant, she would need to retreat without a fight. This was especially problematic, considering that her order was to take these people of various principles and positions under her rule.

Altina soon came to her decision. “We will not lay a hand on your village,” she said. “We won’t tell you to leave, nor will we demand money or goods—that, I promise you. But we *will* camp nearby until the weather clears. And if you harm my soldiers in any way, I will never forgive you.”

It was now Damia's turn to consider the matter...not that he was afforded any more time to come up with a response.

“You may leave,” Altina said. “Pass my words on to your people.”

And with that, soldiers escorted the man outside.

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Belgaria's expeditionary force headed toward the small village of Lokates. Although her discussion with Damia had only been brief, Altina looked weary as she took a seat in the carriage, opposite Regis in his usual spot.

"You did well," he said.

"Hah... You really think so?"

"You made the appropriate decision."

Altina frowned. "I can tell you had something else in mind, Regis. Just tell me what it was already."

"Huh? I don't think that's necessary. You came to your own conclusion."

"I know I can't rely on you forever...but when we're alone, I want you to speak your mind."

Regis and Altina were the only ones in the carriage. Clarisse had tactfully alighted, saying that she had other business to attend to, and while Eric was still carrying out his duty as a guard, he was on horseback nearby.

"I think it's very beneficial for you to work things out on your own," Regis said.

"Thank you," Altina replied. "Now, what would you have done?"

"Exiled them from the village and sent them to their capital."

"Huh?" Altina's expression clouded over. "You'd kick them out?"

"For refusing to show allegiance to Belgaria? Absolutely. I'd give them enough food to comfortably make the journey, though."

The princess grew anxious. "Regis, do you still think I can lead the Empire?"

"Of course."

“Well, when that happens, I want to build peace with the neighboring lands.”

“I know you’re a pacifist.”

“But can I really make peace with people after I’ve driven them from their homes?”

“The man you spoke to was the mayor, not the leader of a nation. He wouldn’t have even the slightest say in a peace treaty.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Regis put his hands up in an attempt to ease the growing tension. “I see where you’re coming from, but most Hispaniards are completely intolerant in their beliefs. They consider it perfectly okay to steal from the heretical other sects—and that’s why their navy is committing acts of piracy.”

“That’s true.”

How would things have turned out if they were a weak band of travelers from the North Sect who had arrived at Lokates unknowingly rather than an expeditionary force? There was little reason to believe they would have escaped unharmed.

“Conquerors who seek world domination through force are irreconcilable with the pacifism you strive for,” Regis said. “In the same vein, it won’t be easy to form cooperative relationships with those who cannot accept other sects.”

Altina cast her eyes down. “That might be so...”

“It’s easy to misunderstand when you profess to believe in pacifism, but...I do not have any delusions that we can change the world through words alone, without confronting or killing anyone.” After all, those who held ostracized beliefs needed to fight for them.

“I’m not that naive either.”

“If we say that hegemony is the aim to defeat everyone who does not obey, then pacifism must be the aim to defeat all those who refuse to work together.”

“Yeah.”

“In both situations, our ability to defend ourselves is crucial. All that changes are the scope and our means.”

Altina gave Regis a questioning look. “So, if you had to make the distinction...you’d consider the people of Lokates our enemies?”

“There’s no denying that they are.”

“I see.”

“They’re powerless civilians, so I don’t want to harm them—such kindness is very important, and the last thing I want is for you to grow numb to it. But if they maintain that all so-called ‘heretics’ are enemies, then we cannot extend an olive branch,” Regis said with certainty.

Altina struggled to find the right words before eventually making her appeal. “They might change someday.”

“That’s why I want to exile them. I want to believe in that possibility.”

“Oh.”

“Although, that’s not all there is to it.”

“What do you mean?”

Regis hesitated for a moment. He was aware that what he was about to say was a little too far on the strategic end of things, but he decided to continue nonetheless. “Tell me—once the exiled villagers arrived at the capital, would the Hispanian Empire even accept them? From a strategic standpoint, such refugees would only consume supplies.”

Using civilians in starvation tactics was one of the basic stratagems of an invasion. It depended on the terrain, of course, but Hispania's central regions were occupied by steep mountains, meaning the large cities and major roads were all along the coast. Those who were driven from their residences had no choice but to head in the direction of the capital.

Altina stared at Regis, exhausted. "You really are..."

"Well, hear me out," he went on. "From our reports, the Hispanian emperor refrained from sending reinforcements to Barcedella. With that in mind, I very much doubt the capital will accept refugees."

"Perhaps not."

"Now, the High Sect decrees that the emperor was chosen by God to rule the earth. Will the people he rejects continue to stubbornly preach that belief, I wonder?"

Altina looked quite displeased. "And then what?" she asked.

"Highers refuse to accept heretics, so you're going to corner them until they have to change their minds?"

"There are records of it working in Count Castrado's *War, Peace, and Religion*. I thought that maybe—"

"Maybe, my foot!" the princess exclaimed. It seemed that she was still rather against the idea.

Regis shrugged. "These methods may not be the most sincere, but in the end, they will decrease the number of people who lose their lives to war."

"I understand what you're saying...I think. It might be a good thing if you can avoid unnecessary deaths—or even war—by doing that."

"Right?"

"But I want to speak to the virtues of equality and pacifism—to come to a mutual understanding with our opponents."

“And what if they never understand...?”

Altina placed a hand to her chest. “It’s not always a bad thing to give your life for your convictions,” she said, clearly choosing her words carefully. “I want to eliminate war from the world—and I would rather die than stray from this goal.”

Regis stared at her closely for a moment and then nodded. “Fine. My strategies are made with you in mind. I will not entertain the thought of pressuring the civilians into giving up their faith,” he promised.

“Thank you, Regis,” the princess replied with a smile.

“No, I should thank you. I was too naive.”

“That’s not true. I think prioritizing lives over all else is the right thing to do.”

The idea of what was “correct” varied from person to person, meaning there were as many “correct” answers as there were people in the world—Regis had seen lines to this effect in a number of different books.

Altina exhaled, allowing the strength to drain from her shoulders as she watched the falling snow through the carriage window. “It was snowing back when we first met,” she said.

“Yeah. It wasn’t the sort that melted away when it touched the ground, though; it was a fierce blizzard.”

“I never knew it snowed this far south.”

“Thankfully, I accounted for bad weather when I did my calculations.”

“Of course you did. We’ll always be fine in your hands, Regis.”

“No, not always... We’re going to find ourselves in a real spot of trouble if our supplies don’t arrive.”

They were in contact with the supply unit that had departed from Sembione, but just making a one-way trip took the messenger several days. They would most likely meet up eventually—the enemy army had already been driven off, and several bases were subjugated, so the supply unit could move faster than the army could march—but Regis still grew anxious. Without fresh supplies, the Belgarian Army would struggle to take the capital.

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“We should crush their supply unit,” Mariam wrote.

“Easier said than done...”

Frasier had arrived in Quintanal, the capital of the Hispanian Empire. Fort Barcedella was lost, but he had returned with thirteen thousand uninjured soldiers and escaped punishment.

They can’t afford to get rid of any commanders when Belgaria is on their doorstep. Had I obeyed my orders and defended the fort to my last breath...

Would the enemy have taken his life? And if not, wouldn’t he have been executed for losing his men? Since he had abandoned the fortress early at Mariam’s behest, he was able to partake in a decent supper at the capital.

“All of our roads run along the coast,” Frasier said. “If we mobilize the army, we’ll run straight into the Belgarian attack force.”

Belgaria had forty thousand soldiers, making them a massive force, but that also meant they consumed far more supplies. Striking at their supply chain would no doubt give Hispania an edge in the war.

“And our enemy is no fool,” he continued, now peeling a shrimp.

“According to our reports, their supply unit is under the protection of ridiculously strong mercenaries. They have gunners with the latest rifles too.”

“We can win if we send thirty thousand soldiers.”

“Yes... If only we had that many to spare.”

There were approximately five thousand combatants guarding Belgaria’s supply unit.

“It’s a waste to keep sixty thousand in the capital.”

“I wouldn’t say that. The enemy has forty thousand, and we have sixty. During a siege, it’s advised that the attacking force have three times as many men as those under attack.”

It was common sense to attack with three times as many men to conquer a castle, meaning the Belgarians would not be able to take the capital—unless they somehow received an outrageous number of reinforcements. The surrounding cities would most likely be lost, but without Quintanal, Belgaria would eventually need to retreat—this was what the emperor and the army’s top brass seemed to believe.

Maintaining forty thousand troops on foreign land was only possible for so long—especially when Belgaria was also at war to the north and east. Furthermore, once spring came around, the Empire would need to start devoting men to farmwork. Abundant food supplies were required to feed the population of a large nation, and unless Belgaria sent back its conscripted farmhands, its harvest would suffer greatly.

“They’ll turn back by March at the latest.”

“Father, surely the Belgarians know that too.”

“Well, they might demand all the land up to Barcedella, but it’s not hard to chase away an army that’s been forced to march home.”

“They won’t make such a demand. That fortress is worthless without command of the seas.”

“Yes, that’s the thing. In the end, Hispania will never fall while the seas are calm.”

“Belgaria has its ship of the line.”

“So does Hispania.”

“We saw the firepower of their new cannons. Our ships cannot defeat theirs.”

Frasier gave a bitter smile. “I can understand why you’d worry after seeing that battle, but if our opponent can win at sea, why did they not start there? The reason is because they need their ships to intimidate High Britannia and the other naval powers. They don’t have the vessels to spare.”

“Wrong.”

“What?”

“Their actions thus far have been to keep the emperor tied down in Quintanal. The faith in this country is strong—the soldiers and civilians would put up a fierce resistance to allow the emperor to escape. Therefore, to reliably capture him—”

Frasier snatched the pen from her hand. “Mariam... Don’t jot that down. We may only be speaking hypothetically, but you’ll still end up on trial.”

To be put on trial meant death, with almost absolute certainty. Hispanian courts were not a place to argue the validity of crimes; they existed to determine the means of execution.

Frasier tossed the paper into the fireplace. “Listen to me, Mariam—sixty thousand soldiers can hold the capital until spring. Such is the plan the emperor has decided upon.”

“We can crush Belgaria’s supply unit with thirty thousand.”

“And how would you circumvent their army?”

“By transporting our men on all the ships dawdling about in the harbor.”

Frasier thought for a moment before lowering his gaze to the map. “Well, it’s certainly possible...”

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Inside the tent, Regis set a number of pieces on the map spread across the table. “I would send the forces stationed in the capital to crush the supply unit by ship.”

Jerome had asked Regis how he would deal with the situation were he on the other side of the conflict, and such was the tactician’s response. Regis demonstratively moved a piece from Hispania’s capital across the sea toward Sembione, while the Black Knight fixed him with a fierce glare.

“Tsk... It’s efficient, if nothing else. But how would we counter that?” Jerome asked, turning his attention to the map.

“I would turn the expeditionary force around. As the enemy waits to ambush our supply unit, we could attack from behind.”

“If we were dealing with an absolute fool, maybe, but any half-minded commander could outmaneuver us with their ships.”

“Hah. Well...” Regis scratched his head. “To be perfectly honest—you’re right.”

“Hispania just needs to load its main force onto its warships. Then, they could sever our supply line and make a quick retreat before we could even attempt to pursue them.”

“Correct.”

“And what are you planning to do if they make that move?!”

“Well, we would need to retreat,” Regis replied as he moved the piece representing the Belgarian expeditionary force all the way back to Sembione.

“Bastard!” Jerome barked, slamming his fist down on the map. “Was that your plan from the start?!”

“Not exactly... You might be interested to know that Mr. Gilbert suspected the same, but I do intend to overthrow Hispania.”

“So, retreat’s your only option?”

“We might have a chance at taking Quintanal...*if* we ignore our supply line.”

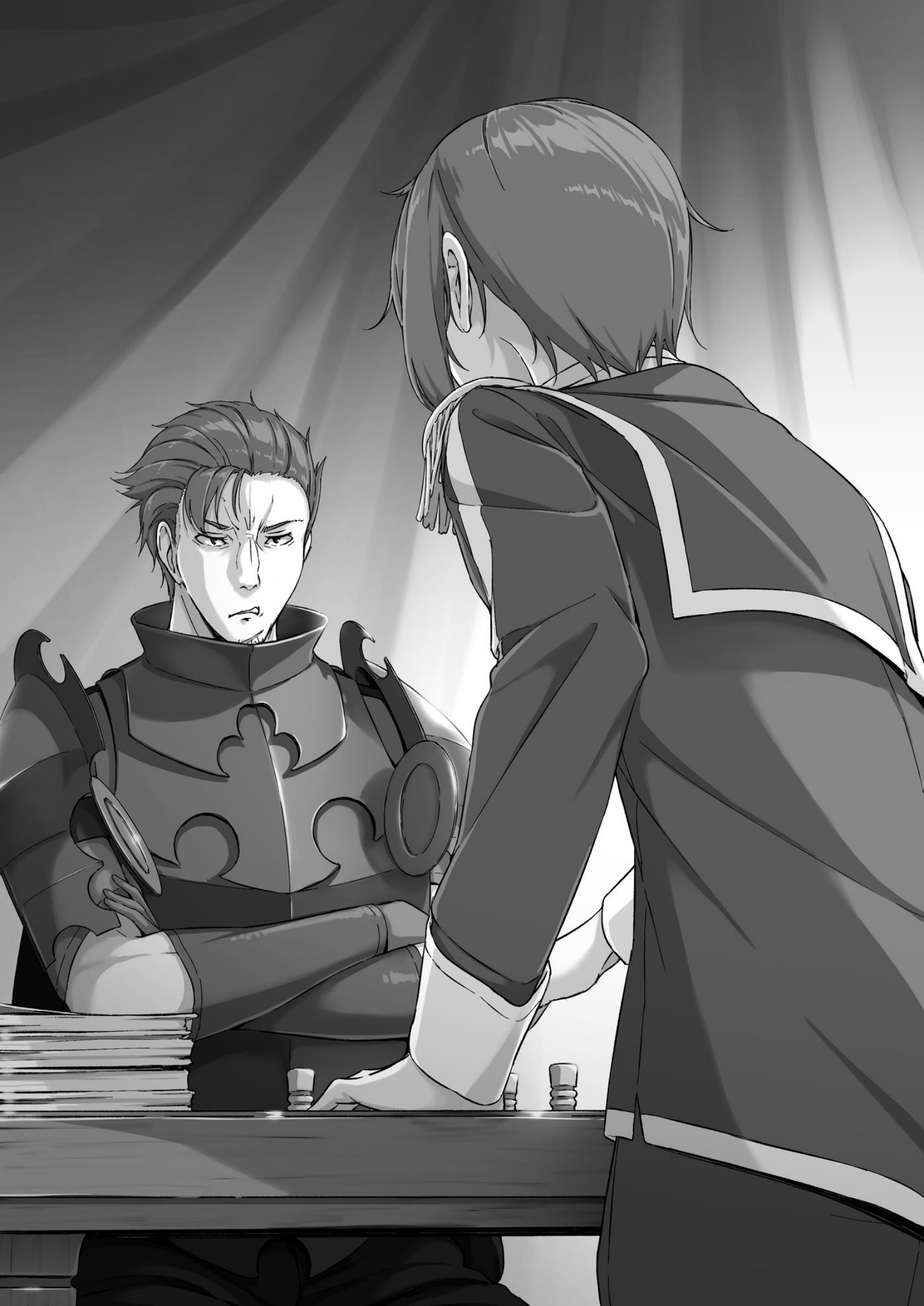
Jerome began cracking the knuckles of his right hand. “Teasing me, eh? You’ve become one hell of a funnyman, Regis. How about I give you a funny face to match?”

“No, no, no... I can explain, but, um... It’s going to take a while.”

“Get on with it, then!” Jerome snapped and slouched back in his chair. “Consider it a generous favor that I’m willing to hear you out.”

Regis began to rearrange the pieces on his map. They were in his personal tent, and it was late at night. He had actually been thinking of going to sleep when Jerome suddenly barged in and started this interrogation. Presumably, the Black Knight had observed the state of the war and noticed that something about the operation was amiss. It went to show how sharp he truly was—there was a piece missing from the board.

“When our army first started this invasion, the Hispanian emperor gathered all his military might in the capital of Quintanal. Fort Barcedella was used as a sacrificial pawn to buy time for this.”



Jerome harrumphed, his expression grim. He was an incredibly harsh individual, even among allies, but he detested the thought of wasting human resources. This seemed to anger him even when it was the enemy doing it, but Regis decided not to read much into it.

“Now,” Regis said, “on to the reason why the Hispanian emperor decided to concentrate his forces.”

“Go on.”

“I leaked some information about half a year ago.”

“You did what?”

“Back when we fought back High Britannia, and the late emperor drew his last breath...it occurred to me that Prince Latrielle would most likely take the throne. In which case, I thought we might be sent on a southern expedition in the near future.”

Jerome was giving Regis a dubious look—the same look, Regis noted, that he had received from Latrielle and Germain so soon before they had attempted to assassinate him. His days were certainly numbered if the Black Knight decided to come for his life as well.

“Err... Have I said something strange?” Regis asked.

“Let me be blunt with you, Regis—you’re a real creep.”

“Huh?!”

“You foresaw being sent on a southern expedition just because you found out about the emperor dying?”

“It was one of many potential outcomes.”

“And you took measures in preparation?”

“As we’re attacking by land, we have almost no way of countering the Hispaniards moving their troops around by sea. I needed to make sure their top brass would want to concentrate their forces.”

“So, what did you do?” Jerome asked, leaning in close.

“I spread word that the Belgarian Army has seized powerful siege weapons from High Britannia.”

“And that’s a lie?”

“For the most part, yes. But for the Hispaniards who had that information, diverting soldiers from the capital would seem much too great a risk, wouldn’t it?”

“Personally, I’d see that as even more reason to ride out and make sure the enemy never reached the city walls.”

“And if the Hispanian emperor shared your nature, he would have amassed his forces at Barcedella,” Regis said. “His first move gave away his grand strategy.”

Hispania’s emperor and those commanding his armies saw defending the capital as their top priority—and their decisions thus far suggested they were confident they could protect Quintanal.

“So, in short,” Jerome said, “you’re the one who arranged this entire situation.”

“Certainly not. Although, I will admit, it was within my expectations.”

“Kah! You’re a trickster!” Jerome pinched his brow, now pushing back on his seat so that it rocked on two legs. The wood creaked under his weight, much to Regis’s concern—he only had one chair in his tent, so he wished it was treated with more care.

Regis was sitting on the bed, much like he had done when Jessica visited previously. “But I really have prepared proper siege weapons,” he said.

“Hmph... I was wondering about those packages that didn’t look like food or equipment. Are they battle ready?”

“We’ve conducted tests.”

“And?”

Regis scratched at his head and groaned. “Mm... Honestly, it’d be best if we could do something about the sea.”

“What about the steamship? We have one sitting nice and pretty for us to use.”

Ms. Jessica said the same... Regis thought with a bitter smile. “I very much doubt they’re going to let us use the captured ship.”

“Then what about the ones made in Belgaria?”

“They’re still in the process of modifying the Aeterna-classes. I’ve sent several petitions for them to be sent over as soon as they’re usable, addressed to Emperor Latrielle...”

“Can you really count on that man?”

Indeed, that was where things got dicey. Assuming that Latrielle prioritized the success of the expedition, there was no way he would ignore Regis’s petition. He had already gone as far as giving Altina the *Généralissime’s* Baton to ensure her success.

However, there was another possible outcome. Altina had once been Latrielle’s political rival, and she was still the largest threat to his position. If assassinating her was too much for him, perhaps his intention was to tie her down on the southern front—without support, the conflict could potentially drag on for years. In fact, by prolonging the war with Hispania to occupy both a political rival and a formidable foe, Latrielle was killing two birds with one stone.

Regis decided to stop dwelling on the idea. “Yes, I think I can,” he said. “The bigger issue is that the steam engines have only recently entered the testing phase.”

“They’ve made that much progress already?”

“They’re operating a steam locomotive in a small town to the southeast of the capital.”

“Is there any point in that location?” Jerome asked, looking at Regis with his head cocked.

“Hm... Waterways are already in use, so it can’t be out of necessity or convenience. It’s presumably so that nothing important is damaged if the locomotive explodes.”

“Eh?”

“There were a lot of accidental explosions early in the development of our new guns and cannons, so the same is sure to happen with our steam engines. The last thing they’d want is for any prominent nobles to sustain injury.”

“So they stuck it somewhere small. Doesn’t surprise me, coming from those piles of trash.”

“Also, it’s far from the border, so it’s easier to keep it a secret,” Regis noted. Emperor Latrielle intended to use his technological edge to achieve victory in this war on so many fronts, so he was very deeply concerned with keeping that information under wraps.

“At least there’s one thing we can agree on,” Jerome remarked. He prioritized willpower and training above all else, but even he was unable to make light of the new weapons that came from these latest innovations.

“Oh, also—once the testing phase is over, they’re going to run a railroad from the capital to the south. They’re already working on the tracks, apparently. By the preliminary calculations, they’ll be able to reduce a caravan’s forty-day round trip to a mere three.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Jerome had never seen a locomotive before, and it seemed that he didn’t believe Regis’s assertion in the slightest.

“But the locomotives in High Britannia are faster than sailing ships.”

“I won’t believe anything I haven’t witnessed with my own eyes. Have you ever *seen* a High Britannian locomotive?”

“No, I haven’t,” Regis admitted. He had a tendency to put his trust in books; once he found the same information in several publications, he started to regard it as reliable. “In any case, it’s going to be a while before the line is up and running. There has been an explosive rise in the Empire’s population, though, so a railway between the capital and the primary agricultural zone will prove a valuable benefit to the country’s development.”

“Will it be able to carry soldiers?”

“Tens of thousands of them.”

“Oh?” Jerome paused for a moment in thought. “Tens of thousands from the capital to the south in just a day and a half...? If that’s true, the locomotive is going to change war more than cannons ever did.”

“You’re right. It will.”

An immense amount of time and supplies were required to move a large army. Once these restrictions were effectively removed, however, numbers on the battlefield could shift at an unprecedented rate. If it was Latrielle’s goal to rule with military might, a railway was crucial.

But it’s going to be months—likely even years—before it’s completed.

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In the end, the scouts monitoring the roads and seas never reported the movement of any Hispanian armies. It seemed the enemy’s forces were not going to leave their capital.

Had nobody ever thought to propose it, or were they in agreement to defend the capital walls? Belgian spies were sent in, hoping to

acquire some answers, but none were able to reach as far as the executive decision room; all they knew were the large-scale movements of the Hispanian Army.

Ten days after the capture of Fort Barcedella—

Although it was slightly later than scheduled, Altina's expeditionary force welcomed their supply unit without issue. Regis smiled as he went over the catalog and said, "You've done us a huge favor, Mr. Gil."

The Mercenary King nodded solemnly. "I've completed my mission, then?"

"Most certainly."

"You're a strange man. Mercenaries are meant for the front lines." He was neither complaining nor teasing—his voice was completely neutral, as though he were making a passing comment about the weather.

"Yes, well... Based on Hispania's movements, our supply unit might have ended up becoming the front line."

"You said they could send armies at us by sea."

"Yet, they didn't so much as move."

"I heard rumors. Belgaria has prepared some powerful siege weapons, apparently."

"Oh, about that..."

"So that was your doing..." Gilbert said, having noticed the change in Regis's expression.

"To be honest... Yes."

"You're the same as ever," the Mercenary King muttered with a deep sigh.

He reacted differently than Jerome, but Gilbert found the plan to be just as appalling. It was evidently unpopular among the warrior types who preferred to trade blows head-on.

“Personally,” Regis said, “I think it’s best when we can win without a fight.”

Gilbert nodded. “I won’t deny that.”

Although the Mercenary King always wore a look of displeasure, never letting his emotions rise to the surface, something about him seemed to suggest that he had more to say. Regis kept silent, awaiting the man’s next words...and after glancing at the mountain of supplies, Gilbert finally spoke again.

“We were likewise entrusted with a supply unit when we were in High Britannia’s employ.”

“Yes, that caused quite a bit of trouble.”

“Back then, your unit turned the tables on us.”

Regis gave only a weak chuckle in response. He wanted to clarify that it was Altina’s unit, not his, but that would only distract from the main point.

“I never thought you would create fog, of all things.”

“It was by pure coincidence that the conditions were just right.”

“I remember thinking that High Britannia’s tactician was quite something...but perhaps that wasn’t the case after all.”

“Do you think so?” Regis asked, recalling Colonel Oswald Coulthard.

“I thought about what happened,” Gilbert said, prodding a finger against his temple. “I thought about it again, and again, and again... Where did I go wrong? What could I have done to win?” Apparently, he had replayed the fight against Altina’s army countless times in his mind.

“Th-That’s...”

Gilbert shook his head. “Ultimately, we would have lost the supplies somewhere. The problem is more fundamental. High Britannia made a mistake in allowing the fourth princess’s army to target their supply unit in the first place.”

“Yeah...”

“On our way through Hispanian territory, we encountered enemy soldiers thrice. They were all the remnants of defeated armies—fools who wandered the main roads without a thought. One of those encounters we won without a fight.”

“You fought twice, then?”

“They must have underestimated us, thinking we were simple couriers,” Gilbert said. The stray units had never imagined that a renowned mercenary brigade would be guarding supplies.

“Hispania’s land army lacks combat experience.”

“Only an amateur can’t gauge the strength of their opponent.”

“I see.”

“On this occasion, we transported so many supplies without receiving any noteworthy resistance. Tell me—why do you think that is?”

“Huh? Well...the state of the war is considerably different.”

The Mercenary King’s lips curled into a rare smile. “The enemy army doesn’t have a Regis d’Aurick—that’s what I see as the answer.”

“N-No... I’m not—”

“Does the Hispanian Empire not have any competent tacticians?”

I wonder... Regis thought. “When we attacked Barcedella, I think our opponent foresaw my plan, to a degree.”

“But the fortress fell nonetheless.”

“That’s because Belgarian soldiers are simply too tenacious.” Regis had expected the plan to fail with so many boats on patrol, so he had been dumbfounded when he heard the reports after the fact. “And when we reached the fort, the Hispaniards had already escaped with over ten thousand soldiers.”

“Hmm. So, they stole a march on you.”

Regis nodded. He had, however, been told a rather intriguing tale by the head of the Barcedella garrison. “The person responsible is the commander’s daughter—a considerable strategist despite her young age.”

“What’s her name?”

“As I recall, it’s Mariam Ruiz Jiménez.”

Chapter 4: The Siege of Quintanal

“His name is...Regis d’Aurick. Their tactician, I mean.”

Mariam nodded in response. She held a pen in her right hand, as per usual, but for once, her left was not moving around a game board. Instead, she held a fork. Many commoners in Hispania still ate with their bare hands, but Frasier hailed from a comital house and ensured that Mariam had at least the most basic table manners.

Frasier was relaying what had been said in the command room. Although Mariam’s opinions were highly regarded, she was a woman and a civilian, meaning she had no place in a war council.

“Despite being a commoner and an administration officer, this Regis fellow was personally selected by the fourth princess,” Frasier continued. “He conquered a Germanian fortress that had held strong for forty years and then drove back High Britannia’s Royal Army—or so they say. He’s now a chevalier and strategist of the Belgian *généralissime*.”

“That sounds like Belgian propaganda.”

“It very well might be. It sounds too contrived.”

“At least, that was my initial thought...but there may be some truth in it. He did a brilliant job of capturing Barcedella.”

Frasier grimaced. “The naval commander said it looked as though there were two fortresses. I didn’t think such a feat was even possible.”

“There was one past record where torches were tied to long spears to make a dinghy appear like a mighty warship.”

“One was the real fortress; the other was the attacking army. Still, I would have thought it easy to tell which one was real. Simply look to see which is moving.”

“Ships on the open sea drift in the wind, so it can be hard to tell whether things on land are actually moving or the ship is.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense...”

“We must give our thanks to the admiral who decided to wait and watch because he couldn’t act with conviction. Had the ship’s cannons bombarded our fort, we would have lost our chance to escape.”

“R-Right.”

A single miscalculation and Frasier would not have been alive to grumble as he was. The very thought made him shudder. Perhaps Mariam would have seemed a little more endearing if she had cowered in a similar manner...but she was continuing to write with one hand while indifferently ferrying mashed potatoes into her mouth with the other. She could not help but write, considering that she was unable to speak, but this was far from the proper conduct of a noblewoman.

They were at Frasier’s residence in the capital, eating a slightly late supper. Frasier had gotten his wife to evacuate to her hometown; he did not believe the capital would fall, but public order worsened in times of war, and there was a chance the battle would be a prolonged one. Perhaps food stock would run low or they would run out of other supplies. Frasier was a soldier who could endure it, but the last thing he wanted was having to pacify his displeased wife on top of everything else.

Mariam was originally meant to have evacuated as well, but her guidance was too important. She started prodding at paella with her left hand as her pen raced across the page. *“His Majesty did not move any soldiers from the capital.”*

“Just so you know, I *did* make the proposal, but His Majesty and his advisors were adamant about there being a siege.”

“How idiotic.”

“Hey now...” Frasier said in a low voice. They were in his house, but there were servants to be cautious of. Most had been dismissed in preparation for the war, but a few were still working. One anonymous report and his commanding role—not to mention his life—would be at risk. However, Mariam did not seem the least bit anxious. She was either dauntless or dense.

“The commanders seem to be fearful of something.”

“This is just a rumor...but the Belgarian Army is said to have prepared some powerful siege weapons. I’m sure they’re preparing countermeasures against them.”

“That’s absurd. If the Belgarians had such things, they would have used them against Fort Barcedella.”

“Maybe they’re concealing their trump card.”

“Belgaria definitely has some siege weapons—I do not doubt that. It is quite conceivable from the amount of supplies they were carrying.”

“The advisors came to the same conclusion.”

“Then we should not let our foe approach the capital.”

“I tried to say that. Honest.”

To put it simply, too many officers and soldiers had fallen on the roads and forts in Belgaria’s path—around thirty thousand men in total. Now, the enemy was only half a day from Quintanal. They could even be there that night.

“They’ve marched for half a month, though, so I’m sure they’ll need a breather.”

Mariam looked as though she had something to add, but Frasier pretended not to notice and shoved a sausage in his mouth.

“Had our commanders severed the Belgarians’ supply line while we were stalling them at Barcedella, the invaders would have been forced to retreat.”

“Maybe,” Frasier replied through a mouthful of sausage. “But maybe not. Maybe the Belgarians would just—*nom*—ignore their rear line and attack the weakened capital.”

Just the year before, the High Britannian Army had made it deep into Belgian territory. Even when they lost their supplies and their fleet, they had pressed on. According to the reports, they were ultimately beaten by Marshal General Latrielle, who was but a prince at the time. Perhaps the Empire would do the same against Hispania.

Frasier swallowed the food in his mouth. “The fact that Barcedella fell quicker than expected is another reason why our executives are in such a hurry to fortify Quintanal. It’s far from easy for someone in my position to propose any assertive measures.”

“Belgaria had to conquer that fort as quickly as possible. And yet, they spent so much time.”

“So you’re trying to say they don’t have any powerful siege weapons? But what if they’re just saving them? I suppose that, with sixty thousand soldiers in Quintanal, we won’t lose even if our defenses are breached. We surpass the Belgarians in numbers and supplies.”

Hispania would not lose as long as its emperor remained safe. In this situation, they simply had to protect the capital.

Frasier stabbed his fork into a cut of meat. “Come to think of it, couldn’t it have been Regis’s plan to spend so long at Fort Barcedella? Prompting reinforcements from Quintanal would take away his numerical advantage. Indeed, couldn’t that have been the enemy’s intention? Sixty thousand soldiers before His Majesty—

nothing can be more reliable than that. At least, that's what the advisors say."

Mariam nodded and then wrote, *"I'll keep that in mind."*

"You seem displeased."

"Had this been my call to make, I would never have given that tactician the chance to choose his means of approach. There's no telling what he's plotting. It's much too dangerous."

"That's what we're preparing for."

"When the enemy's next move is unknown, trying to prepare for everything is a poor response."

"You think so? I see that as the fundamental theorem of defense."

"Father, the fundamental theorem of war is to win without a fight. And if not that, the next best thing would be to win without giving the enemy a chance to do anything."

"Yes, but reality never works out so conveniently."

"We could send ships around and pincer the Belgarian Army with twenty thousand soldiers from both sides, all while keeping twenty thousand in the capital. That would limit the options of even the most prodigious tactician. It would afford us the initiative."

"A fine strategy—but one the command room will never accept. It just occurred to me, but why did you never propose this while we were in Barcedella? Severing their supply line, I mean."

"You're growing forgetful, Father. We had fifteen thousand soldiers at the time. How many reserves did our attackers have?"

"Right... Twenty thousand."

There was no guarantee that Belgaria would invest all its reserves into defending its supply unit, but either way, it would have been difficult for those at Barcedella to succeed with what they had available at the time. This was a tactic that was only effective with

sixty thousand soldiers to spare. It was impossible to sever Belgaria's supply lines by half measures, but Hispania's commanders would never permit the use of such a large force.

Frasier raised the piece of meat skewered on his fork and declared, "Well, so be it. This battle is Hispania's victory. Belgaria has marched deep into our territory and exhausted themselves in the process. Quintanal is a sturdy, expertly fortified city, and we have enough troops to defeat our foe on the open plains. The surrounding seas are lined with our warships."

"So, our preparations are perfect?"

"Precisely."

"And Belgaria is marching upon us, fully aware of that?"

"Belgaria's new emperor is a young military man. At his order, his armies will advance as far as they can. And no soldier can disobey their commands—that much is true in any nation."

"A plebian may do only what they are told, but a hero will prevail in the face of adversity."

"Well, there won't be any heroes on this battlefield. Half a month, perhaps—the Belgarian Army can't maintain their forces for much longer than that."

Perhaps the Belgarians would receive supplies from their home country, but it took a considerable amount of money to send those units back and forth with guards. The Hispanian Army had no such problems—even if all their roads were blocked, they could still rely on their sea routes. Quintanal was continuing to receive ships filled with goods.

"And who knows? We might even reach an accord if we glare at each other long enough."

"Indeed; that might be possible."

“I’m assuming Belgaria will demand all of the land up to Fort Barcedella—not that His Majesty will concede even the smallest piece.”

“A mere soldier has no say in the negotiation. There’s no need to think about it.”

“I might get some time off once the war is over. An excellent chance to kick back and relax in the countryside. I’ve never much taken to the capital.”

“Father, you haven’t been fired just yet...”

“I’m talking about a normal vacation! I may have lost some men, but I haven’t failed severely enough for them to dismiss me!” Frasier shot back, speaking so passionately that minuscule food scraps spewed from his mouth and onto Mariam. She frowned as she wiped the spittle off with a napkin.

“You claim that a hero won’t appear, but who can say for sure? Father, you simply must fight off the Belgarian Army.”

“What are you talking about? We barely have over ten thousand men. We’re just reserves here.”

“This is your chance to recover your lost ground.”

“No, seriously. I haven’t been demoted either.”

Close to twenty thousand soldiers were lost at Barcedella, but Belgaria had forty thousand. Frasier’s men had successfully stalled for time.

Mariam stared at Frasier. *“Are you satisfied with your current treatment? Are you fine with having been treated as a sacrificial pawn?”*

“Erk...”

“If not, I can offer you a plan.”

His daughter's incredibly condescending attitude was irritating to no end, but... "I'm willing to see what you have in mind, at least."

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Belgaria's expeditionary force set up camp around three lieue (thirteen kilometers) from Quintanal—a three-hour march, by their estimate. A large quantity of water was required for a certain plan, and considering how they needed to sustain forty thousand soldiers, they had chosen to settle on the banks of a lake.

Quintanal was to their south, and the lake to their east. Across the highway to their west lay the open sea, and to their north was a vast, open plain with an orchard. It was a pity, but they had nowhere better for their base of operations. The owner had already run away, so the estate was being used as a medical office.

That afternoon—

A man arrived at Regis's personal tent—which was pitched right beside the army's strategic headquarters—carrying a hefty wooden crate. "It sure is hot around here..." he remarked as he set the crate down beside the tactician's desk and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Thanks for everything."

His visitor was none other than Ferdinand Stuttgart, captain of the Belgian sappers. "This area is always supposed to be this hot, even in the winter," Regis replied as he moved the book that lay open over the map. "That snow was a special case."

"That's good to hear. Especially cold weather would only delay our work."

"As for the location..." Regis prodded at a point on the map. "I think here should be optimal."

Ferdinand nodded. "I'll have to agree with you there. I investigated the soil on the way here. It seems moderately firm, although we won't know for sure until we start digging."

"In that sense, we've got no time to waste."

"I'll start prepping at once, then."

"I'm counting on you."

"Here are the details and the schedule." Ferdinand took a bundle of paper from the wooden crate at his feet, which Regis took and scanned.

"Nicely done."

"Thanks," Ferdinand replied with a self-assured chuckle. "The enemy's in for quite the surprise."

"Yes, they are. And if they're surprised enough to raise the white flag... Well, that would make our job a lot easier."

"Do you think there's a chance?"

"In truth...it won't be that simple. Hispania is more than accustomed to a constant state of war—albeit not quite as much as Belgaria. These battles have mostly been by sea, but these past hundred years, they've continued to grow by conquering all their neighboring powers."

"Certainly."

"For what it's worth," Regis said, "I'll try to ensure we don't lose too easily. But..."

"I'll make sure we're done in a hurry."

"Ah." Regis scratched at his head. "To be honest...I want you ready to flee at a moment's notice."

Ferdinand was taken aback for a moment, then he burst into laughter. “Bwah hah hah! There you go again, Tactician!”

“I’m not joking.”

“Hah... I hear you loud and clear.” Ferdinand gave a crisp salute. “I’ll make sure we’re done in a hurry—*and* that we’re prepared to run.”

“Much obliged.”

It was December 10th, in the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar.

On one side of the conflict stood forty thousand of the *généralissime*’s expeditionary force, alongside the ten thousand who had transported their most recent supply haul. On the other side were sixty thousand men mustered from key points across the land, working under the direct orders of the Hispanian emperor. Their capital city had never been breached from the day it was founded.

Over a hundred thousand were prepared for combat, and with that, the curtain slowly rose on the Battle of Quintanal.

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The Belgarian Army’s plan hinged on Ferdinand and his construction team, while the Hispanian Army decided to wait until their foe exhausted themselves. Neither side moved to meet the other, and ten days went by without a single engagement.

Early in the morning—

Frasier yawned as he popped his head into the dining hall. Bread, soup, salad, and cheese—the selection and quantity were no different from what he would enjoy in peacetime, perhaps owing to his position in the military. The same could not be said for the quality, however. Although the cooks were using their ingenuity to

cover it up, the bread was darker, and a peculiar scent wafted from the salad.

Hispania's sea routes were secure, but it was no simple task to provide for sixty thousand soldiers. And to add insult to injury, their scheduled supply shipment had never arrived. The resentful cries from the logistics officers of every unit grew louder by the day.

"Just as expected," Frasier muttered. "This is going to be a long battle."

Surprisingly, Mariam was already in the dining hall. She wasn't even in her nightgown—for once, she was dressed somewhat like a lady. Upon noticing Frasier enter, she pointed out the window and went, "Mnn!"

"What?"

"Mm!" She began slapping her hand against the glass.

"Is there something...stuck to the window?" Frasier ventured. His suggestion was met with a look of sincere disappointment from the young woman, as though she had completely lost faith in any intellect he may—or may not—have had. "I'm not even allowed a joke, eh...?" he asked with a shrug and then headed over.

The window was in the perfect position to watch Belgaria's encampment—not that there was much they could see from over two legua (eleven kilometers) away.

"Smoke?" Frasier asked, his eyes narrowed. Black clouds were billowing from the enemy camp, and far too much to be explained away as breakfast preparations. "Arson, maybe?" He turned to Mariam, who was now regarding him with a look that seemed to question whether he was of sound mind. "Again, it was only a joke," he said. "Our scouts are diligent. A simple trip to the command room should reveal whatever's happening at their campsite."

Mariam took a sheet of paper resting at the edge of the dining table and smoothly wrote, *"I'm coming too."*

"Don't be absurd," Frasier replied. "I can't bring a civilian to the palace with me."

Mariam's shoulders dropped. She had enough common sense to know that accompanying Frasier was out of the question, but it seemed that she had thought it worth a shot anyway.

Frasier pulled out a chair for himself and took a seat. "Come now, Mariam. We mustn't miss our premeal prayer."

It was midway through this prayer that a butler entered, bearing an express message. Frasier took and unfurled the document, which had come from the command room.

"Mm... Mnn..." Mariam glanced over curiously as she made her way through a mouthful of cheese.

According to the message, due to changes observed in the Belgian Army, Frasier was receiving an urgent summons. This much was to be expected, but there was a section that made him doubt his eyes—he was to attend "alongside Mariam Ruiz Jiménez." He read the passage a second and then a third time before turning his gaze to the girl in question. "You haven't done anything...have you?"

"I don't understand your meaning."

"His Majesty wants to speak with you, apparently. But why...?" Frasier wondered aloud. In an attempt to keep any unwanted attention away from Mariam, he had only told his close aides in the army about her. "Ghh... Did someone set this up?"

Mariam's face suddenly lit up. In an instant, her pen was racing across the page. *"His Majesty is wise indeed."*

"R-Right..."

“And to think I thought him a complete fool. It seems I’ll need to reevaluate that opinion.”

“I told you not to write things like that!” Frasier snatched the paper, scrunched it up into a ball, and then threw it into the dining hall fireplace. His breathing was heavy. “Do you understand our position?! Those folks in His Majesty’s command room aren’t as understanding as I am! If they detect so much as a whiff of insolence from you, we’ll *both* be sent to the gallows!”

“Calm down, Father.”

“And in the first place—!”

“Do you really think someone who knew about me spread word to His Majesty to ruin your standing?”

“It’s...possible.”

“I think you’re forgetting something important.”

“Hm?”

“You’re not really worth the effort to—” Mariam began to write but stopped when she saw Frasier clenching his teeth. She struck her chest in a show of confidence. *“Fret not. I thought this might happen someday, so I had Grandfather teach me the proper etiquette to take before His Majesty.”*

“That’s exactly why I’m worried.”

Even so, it was a direct order. Frasier needed to take Mariam to see the emperor whether he wanted to or not, and with that thought, he let out a deep sigh.

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At the center of the Hispanian royal palace was a grand tower, like a spear thrust toward the heavens. It had belonged to a cathedral, once upon a time. The other sections of the palace had been constructed around it, and the interior took on quite a religious

motif—the halls were adorned with countless paintings and carvings of sacred scenes. It was said that the most pious believers would break into tears upon witnessing it, and yet...

It's quite dreary, to be honest.

Frasier's opinion of the royal palace was no different from when he had first set eyes on it. He was by no means a nonbeliever, nor was he critical of the emperor's rule—he just wasn't certain about the palace itself. God, the same almighty creator the priests always spoke about, would never dwell in such a stiff and ceremonious place, he thought. If such an all-powerful being took greater comfort in the gloomy and austere, why would he have given the world such sublime scenery? Why would he have given form to such dynamic beasts, or produced such lively tunes? Indeed, this was no place of God. Frasier's father had once made this clear to him.

Thinking back on it now, I'm pretty sure the old man was a heretic...

Frasier glanced beside himself to see Mariam staring around curiously. "Don't act too suspiciously," he warned.

Mariam nodded in response, but she made no attempt to disguise her interest.

They had been called to a war council, so they were headed not to the audience chamber but the command room. A guard opened the door for them, revealing an interior that was notably Belgian in style—the tables and chairs were covered with intricate detail, although these, too, had very religious undertones, reflecting the pious people of the land.

The generals were already gathered in the room, and the oldest serving one immediately turned to them. "Sir Frasier. You're late," he said admonishingly.

“My apologies,” Frasier replied. “The request came quite suddenly, and it took some time for my daughter to get ready.”

Mariam stared at him. He had been so against bringing her to the royal palace that he had tried coming up with one excuse after another to turn down the request—and the next thing he knew, they were running late. The blame ultimately rested on his shoulders.

“So, she’s...”

“The granddaughter of the Great Warmaster.”

Murmurs came from the ten-odd officers glancing at Mariam. Soon, the old steward informed the room that the emperor would make his entrance, prompting everyone to stand. An exclusive door opened in the back, and a slender, emaciated man appeared.

This was Amador Alneraz Otello, the emperor of the Hispanian Empire. He was a white-haired old man wearing an equally white cap and a silver outfit that sparkled ever so subtly. Belgarian royalty preferred the color red, but Hispania took pure white, as reverence to the Lord above.

The emperor took a seat, and the officers followed. Frasier was practically at the foot of the table, with only Mariam sitting farther down than him. She began to ready her ink and paper on the table, then picked up her pen. Her condition had already been conveyed to everyone present.

“I am humbled. It is my greatest honor to be granted an audience with His Majesty.”

Written like a true soldier, Frasier thought. He was growing anxious, although he refrained from letting it show. Mariam’s message was passed to the old steward, who then presented it to the emperor.

A smile creased the emperor's already wrinkled face. "How very nostalgic," he said. "When I first met with the Great Warmaster, he gave me those very same words."

The emperor was a man who never showed his true intentions, but he was smiling on the surface, and that was enough to relax the mood for the time being. Frasier thought it necessary to warn the room that although Mariam was wise due to her grandfather's influence, she was still only a child. Before he could speak, however, another officer raised a hand.

"We received a vital report," the man said. "The Belgarian Army has taken action."

Frasier lowered his half-raised hand. The enemy's movements were the most pressing topic of the morning—he couldn't just interrupt to talk about his daughter.

"The enemy dug a pit at their campsite, filled it with fuel, and set it on fire," reported the plump lieutenant in charge of reconnaissance. It seemed that not a soul understood what these actions meant.

"What do you think they're doing?" the commander in chief asked.

"*Ahem.*" The lieutenant cleared his throat and then said, "Well, our engineering consultant suggested it might be a blast furnace."

Despite this intel, he sounded equally as confused as everyone else.

"A blast furnace?"

"Yes. To process iron. The color of the smoke confirms that they're using coke as fuel. They seem to be molding iron, drawing water from the lake to regulate the temperature."

Unfortunately, this explanation only deepened the mystery. "Are they making cannons in the middle of a war?" muttered another officer—a man who had stayed silent up until that point.

"Do they intend to build a fort?"

The officers were taken aback. If the Belgarians constructed a fortress at their current location, Quintanal would lose its function as a center of commerce. Everything behind that new landmark would effectively be under Belgian control without the need for any negotiations.

Talk about a vile plan.

Mariam scoffed—a reaction that made almost every man in the room turn to her with sharp eyes. Frasier feared that his heart was going to stop, but the young woman, completely indifferent to the shifting mood, started racing her pen across paper.

“They cannot conceivably build such a thing. The Belgian Army strives to never lock down its lines and to always press forward. The soldiers have homes and families to return to. If our foe constructed such a fortress on enemy soil, how many soldiers would need to occupy it, and where would the funds come from? We are dealing with a superpower, yes, but its funds are not unlimited. We should be able to estimate how much money and how many men they can invest in the war from the information we already have. Are you really thinking about this?”

“My apologies,” said the officer who had made the fortress suggestion in the first place. He gave a bow and then stood down.

“In that case,” the commander in chief pressed, now exuding a tremendous intensity, “what do you think about the enemy’s movements, Sir Frasier?”

“Huh?!”

What’s this got to do with me?! I’m just...

Mariam was attending as Frasier’s daughter, so she was being treated as something of an adjutant to him. Paying little heed to her father’s stomach pains, she answered, “*I can think of no precedent, meaning it must be an unknown.*”

“What?!” the commander in chief exclaimed. “After talking so big—well, *writing* so big—how can you say that you haven’t a clue?!”

Mariam raised a hand to silence him. It was a bold move, and some of the officers swallowed their breaths as they waited to see what she would put forward next. She was a fast writer, but her method of communication still took longer than it would take the average person to speak.

“The enemy’s plan is unknown, but we know they have a plan. They will not be able to transport a blast furnace, so if we can send troops to drive them away from that site, we won’t have anything to fear.”

“You’re proposing that we leave the capital and fight?”

“I consider it preferable to sitting and waiting for the enemy’s plans to come to fruition.”

Those gathered exchanged feverish glances and started whispering with their neighbors. It was quite an uproar, and throughout it, Mariam continued to write.

“The Belgarian Army must have anticipated this situation before the war even started. Do we have any basis on which to say the grand contraption this wise tactician appears to be setting up is but an empty bluff? The details may be unknown, but the potential threat to our capital remains.”

All of a sudden, the old steward suddenly raised a hand. The room fell silent, and only then did the emperor speak.

“Even if we mobilize all of our forces, will we be able to fight off the Belgarian Army?”

“If you would allow my perspective,” the commander in chief said, “even with sixty thousand, I do not believe we can best them. Our guns and cannons are painfully inferior, and our infantry and cavalry pale in comparison to theirs.” He then noticed the deepening furrow

in the emperor's brow and added, "Hispania is the strongest nation at sea, though! Our navy has never seen defeat, not even against High Britannia's steamships!"

Well, no...but isn't that because we've never exchanged fire with them?

Hispania's warships were exceptionally mobile, but they were also smaller and weaker than foreign models. By estimate, they were roughly twenty years behind Belgaria and High Britannia. To compensate for this, the Hispaniards made their ships cheaply and at a much faster rate, and their navy took great care to size up their opponents before a battle. They masqueraded as pirate ships and attacked merchant vessels—although they would never say as much on the record. It was as a result of these rather dubious actions that the Belgarian Army had marched right to their doorstep.

"Quintanal will not fall as long as we have our sea routes," the emperor declared, nodding in response to the commander in chief.

"It is my pride and joy to receive these words of wisdom," the man replied, his head reverently lowered. "We shall not allow the enemy's plan to perturb us, and we shall stake our lives to defend the capital."

The emperor drew a cross in the air. "May you go forth with the grace of our Lord."

Soon, the officers were all voicing their praise to God. Frasier was naturally among them, and when he glanced to his side, he saw a note from Mariam that had yet to be shown to the others.

"Even if we cannot win, we can force them from their current base of operations. If our enemy is so focused on this grand contraption that they would abandon their mobility, it should be possible to use that against them. Use their conceit to destroy their ranks."

Frasier snatched the paper away in the blink of an eye, before anyone could see it. Mariam gazed up at him, firmly biting her lip, but he merely placed a gentle hand on her head.

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On the twentieth day of the Battle of Quintanal—

Ferdinand was three days ahead of schedule when he completed the task assigned to him, and no sooner had the man finished than he collapsed on the spot.

“Mr. Ferdinand?!” Regis exclaimed as he frantically raced over.

Eric came with him and dropped to one knee beside their fallen comrade, his eyes wide. “He’s...asleep?!”

“Well, I suppose he *has* spent many sleepless nights...”

“Should we let him rest, then?”

“Hm... Can they fire properly?”

Ferdinand’s eyes snapped open. “Of course they can!”

“Ah. You were awake?” Regis asked.

“Of course I was! There’s no time for me to lie around. Now please, Tactician, come and see!”

“He was definitely asleep,” Eric whispered, sounding concerned, “so why would he deny it?”

“I don’t think it was intentional,” Regis replied. “He didn’t seem to have even noticed that he lost consciousness. After so many all-nighters, he must have just passed out.”

“Oh no...”



Physically, Ferdinand was already far beyond his limit, yet there was a spring in his step. “Ah, what wonderful weather!” he said. “It’s a perfect day for cannons!”

“R-Right...”

Regis sent Eric to fetch Altina.

There were four huts at the Belgarian campsite, each a five-minute walk apart. Not just Regis, but a great many soldiers were gathered around one in particular, while the engineers who had constructed them watched from a distance.

Altina soon arrived with Eric. “So, it’s finished, then?” she asked.

Regis nodded. “Mr. Ferdinand was able to complete everything ahead of schedule.”

“We had to rush a little,” Ferdinand admitted, “but the quality can’t be beaten!”

“Thanks for all your hard work,” the princess said.

“Ah! Ah, what bliss!” the sapper captain cried as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Altina drew back a little. “Hey, uh...Regis. Was he always this excitable?”

“He’s extremely sleep-deprived.”

As the officers started to gather, Jerome trudged over with a mighty yawn—the lack of any engagements since their battle commenced twenty days prior had made him somewhat complacent. He wasn’t carrying around a bottle of wine, thankfully, but he hadn’t even bothered to button up his shirt.

“Wow. A load of scrap iron,” he remarked. “So, what’s the point of all this?”

“This is *not* scrap iron,” came a familiar female voice. “And can’t you make yourself a bit more presentable in front of the *généralissime*?!”

Jerome’s adjutant Marion began buttoning up the Black Knight’s uniform in a huff, although she wasn’t wearing any armor herself. Elsewhere, Regis could see Holger of the Black Knight Brigade and Abidal-Evra of the Flying Swallows. Barasco was entrusted with the camp’s defenses, and as a man who led by example, he would personally take up patrol each and every morning.

Almost nobody from Renard Pendu was in attendance—not that its members were the sort to take part in such an event anyway. Their tactician Jessica, however, seemed surprisingly inquisitive; Regis noticed she was watching from afar.

Ferdinand used a red flag to signal the sappers by the first hut, which was cordoned off with rope. They saluted in turn and then started making their final preparations.

“Can’t we move any closer?” Altina asked, cocking her head to one side.

“We’ve done some calculations,” Regis replied. “Moving beyond this point is much too dangerous.”

“Huh?”

“Even at this distance, an accidental discharge could cost lives. But if we moved any farther away, we wouldn’t be able to see what was happening.”

“It’s that bad, is it?”

All of a sudden, there came a call of, “Release!” from the first hut. Its wooden walls fell away in all directions not even a moment later to unveil...a cannon. But this was no ordinary cannon—it looked to be

ten times the size of what the Belgarians were used to, and all those who witnessed it cried out in awe.

“All right...” Regis said, his hands balled into tight fists.

Jerome was midyawn when he noticed the gargantuan cannon. The sight alone stunned him into silence, but only for a moment. He wrapped an arm around the tactician’s neck from behind and yelled, “Oi, Regis! The hell is that?!”

“Gweh! I-It’s a cannon.”

“Well, obviously! How come it’s so damn big?!”

“It’s an ultrahigh-range 120 Besieger. As you might expect, it’s too large to carry by land. In fact, you can’t transport it by ship either.”

“How the hell did it end up here, then?!”

“We brought bits and pieces of the mold with us, alongside the necessary iron and fuel. As I said, the cannon itself can’t be transported, and making a version that can be disassembled wasn’t an option, since that would reduce its firepower. The iron was already refined, so we just needed to melt it down and pour it into the reconstructed mold on site,” Regis explained. All of the finer parts had simply been produced in workshops and carried along with their supplies.

“Can that thing fire?!” Jerome cried out, now overcome with childish glee.

“Of course it can. The test piece we made outside Sembione could shoot up to three lieue away.”

Had the cannon not been capable of reaching such a distance, its construction so far from the Hispanian capital would have been pointless. Of course, there were other factors that needed to be considered too. The effectiveness of cannon shells could change depending on wind, temperature, and moisture—this much was

known already—but there was also research being conducted on how the earth’s rotation and geomagnetism could impact trajectory.

Would gunpowder that had weathered the salty breeze along the highway still perform the same? Would this model of cannon match their prototype in performance? They had made four this time, all a safe distance from one another so that if one exploded, it would not set off a chain reaction.

“This is a historic moment, Tactician,” Ferdinand said. “Shall we start the bombardment?”

Regis turned to Altina. “Princess.”

“Quintanal contains not just Emperor Amador Alneraz Otello and his sixty thousand soldiers, but also a hundred thousand civilians,” Altina said. “If this massive cannon possesses as much firepower as its appearance suggests, it might cause death on an unprecedented scale. However, I’ve resolved to win this war. Belgaria’s victory here is necessary for the creation of a peaceful world, and so...” She raised a hand into the air and then brought it down. “Fire!”

Ferdinand waved a red flag. “Fire!”

A gunner lying on the ground pulled at a rope attached to the first cannon, and a tremendous roar immediately followed. The explosion was louder than anyone could put into words, and the resultant shock wave made Regis particularly thankful that the colossal weapon was bolted down. Even the most robust soldiers were unable to suppress a yelp, and their tempered warhorses began to riot.

The breath of the cannon was more white than red, and it spewed twice as much black smoke than it did flame. A massive cannon shell tore through the blinking flash and the black smog and soared through the clear blue sky at an indescribable speed. The barrel was

deliberately angled to achieve the correct distance, and the shell drew a great parabola before falling beyond the horizon.

Dust was thrown up into the air, and clouds of smoke billowed into the sky. The resounding *boom* of the impact came a moment later. The soldiers clamored as they wondered whether they had struck their target.

“Success!” Ferdinand cried, throwing his arms up in celebration. His sappers likewise rejoiced, pleased to have seen the cannonball soar just as it had during their test runs.

Not everything had gone as expected, however: the wind swept up the flames and spread them onto a nearby infantryman’s tent, which was ablaze before the fire brigade could even act; the army’s horses sprinted away as fast as their legs would take them, with the stable hands hot on their trails; and the gunner, who had endured the shock wave at such close range after firing the cannon, now lay unconscious and was being dragged away by the relief team.

Altina’s face clouded over as she saw the disastrous scene playing out before her. “Regis...was that a failure?” she asked.

“No, no, no. It was a success,” Regis replied. “This experiment was quite valuable, even in teaching us what to expect from the aftermath. It’s all a learning experience.”

“That’s not what I mean! Did our cannonball hit its target?”

“We won’t know for a while.”

“Huh?!”

“Even if we made a watchtower, three lieue away is somewhere over the horizon.”

“Ah... I guess so.”

“Our observation team is hiding at the midway point. They should be sending a horseman with the results right about now. Once we know

where our shot landed, we can work out how much we need to alter the positioning of our cannons. I think I explained this while we were at sea. The first attempt is an overshoot and the second an undershoot; a skilled naval cannoneer should manage to strike their target on the third. Since we're on land and targeting a large city, however, I'm hoping to hit our mark right away."

In the meantime, the cannon needed to be cleaned out and examined. A single shot produced an immense amount of soot, and there was a chance that the barrel might have been distorted or cracked, which would render the weapon entirely unusable. An immense heat radiated from the iron, so intense that the air around it bent and swayed.

After inspecting the cannon all over, Ferdinand formed a circle with his hands. It seemed that the gun had survived the shot.

"So, when can we fire it again?" Altina asked.

"It has to cool first, then we'll need to load it with gunpowder and shells. I expect we'll have to wait about an hour in total."

"Huh?!"

"Now, now... A lot of work went into this, you know. Just compare it to Lugia's Fireshot from *Kalyewn's Adventure*. That one required *two* hours per shot."

"Is it really all right for you to compare this to a story?!"

"Well, either way, it seems a little late for that. Oh, I see the next cannon is ready."

Regis pointed to the cannon farthest away, where Ferdinand was now standing and wiping the sweat from his brow. It was quite impressive, considering that the man had been busily inspecting the first cannon just a moment ago. He swung his flag without missing a

beat—he had already received Altina’s order and refused to wait a second longer.

“Fire!”

This time, the gunner pulled his rope from behind a shield. Again, there was a massive shock wave and a flashy burst of smoke as the second cannonball tore through the air. It drew a similar trajectory as it flew.

It seemed that the construction of this cannon had been left to another technician, as among the revelry were cheers of, “Hooray for Unit Two!”

“This could almost be a festival of sorts, if only the nature of our actions here weren’t so unfortunate,” Altina said, sounding quite despondent.

“I agree.”

Although they had yet to receive confirmation, it seemed safe to assume that many had or were about to lose their lives—these were destructive new weapons, after all, so anything less would be a cause for concern. As the third shot was fired, a report arrived on the outcome of the first.

“On the mark!” Ferdinand announced, raising a victorious fist to the sky. “It landed somewhere in Quintanal!” He and the other sappers were by no means alone in their celebrations—this time, the officers were cheering along with them.

“How the tables have turned,” Jerome cackled. “Looks like those Hispaniard jellyfish are gonna have to leave their cushy little hideouts. All right, men—prepare for battle! We’re outnumbered, so put your backs into it!”

“Wh-Why do you look so excited...?” Marion asked, the color gone from her cheeks.

“Are you a fool or something? We came all the way here to kill our foe, and now we can finally do our jobs! What’s not to be excited about?!”

“This is a war. You might be the one who gets killed...”

“Hah! If they’ve got someone strong enough to manage that, I sure as hell want to meet them! Would make this whole trip worthwhile—not that anyone out there actually stands a chance.”

Naturally, the sappers weren’t the only ones who had worked their hardest since the battle commenced twenty days prior; Belgaria’s camp had been fortified with fences and moats.

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Even after the first few shots landed, the Hispaniards had no idea what was going on. There were sudden explosions, and fires blazed around the houses and markets, so the incident was initially considered to be an accident of some sort...but the roaring booms from the Belgarian camp and several witness accounts of cannonballs raining down from above led them to a single conclusion.

We’re under fire.

That night—

A war council was urgently convened. As far as Frasier was aware, this was the first time the emperor had ever attended such a conference after dinnertime. Mariam had not been summoned this time—she was an afterthought, and the situation was much too dire for anyone to consider calling her.

“The Belgarian Army has opened fire from over two legua away,” the commander in chief reported. “It seems they’ve prepared cannons of the highest caliber.”

The officers all swallowed their breaths, while Frasier looked on with a bitter expression. *So, it turned out just as Mariam predicted...* he thought to himself. Their opponent had prepared weapons to break the siege, and they had refrained from even bringing them out during the battle for Fort Barcedella. Frasier found it quite humiliating to have lost to an enemy who was evidently holding back.

“According to our scouts,” the commander in chief continued, “there are four gargantuan cannons at the center of their encampment. Maintenance is required after every shot, and it seems they can fire each cannon only once per hour.”

Upon hearing this news, the gathered officers seemed to relax. “Once per hour?” one repeated. “That sounds manageable.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” the commander in chief shot back, his tone reprimanding. “Even if our foes limit themselves to daylight hours, that’s still over fifty shots per day. And their range isn’t our only concern—their firepower is just as phenomenal.”

Frasier nodded in agreement—the worse the situation, the more a commander tended to undervalue the enemy—and then added, “There might even be more on the way.”

The officers’ faces all paled. *I get that they don’t want to think about it, but isn’t that the obvious concern?* It seemed that the commander in chief agreed, as he wasted no time in voicing his worry.

“It seems the Belgarian Army made their cannons using a blast furnace. We have no way of knowing how much raw material they have left, and we must consider further production.”

“Let’s go out and get them!” one young officer roared and shot to his feet. “There’s no way the Lord would want us to sit and wait as our great capital is reduced to ash!”

“That’s right!” another young man exclaimed. “We outnumber them and everything!”

Frasier could sense that they were playing right into the enemy’s hands, although he dared not say it. *If sending our main forces out to meet them was always going to be inevitable, we should have worked to sever their supply chain while we were holding them at Barcedella. We also could have attacked when the Belgarians first arrived outside the capital—our foe had marched, fought, and exhausted themselves for over half a month by that point.*

But now, the enemy was well rested, and their camp was fortified. They were perfectly prepared—and they had almost certainly made sure of this before they even started to construct their special cannons. No longer could the Hispanian Army secure victory by defending their position. Now, they had no choice but to sally forth.

Yet another commissioned officer raised a hand. “U-Um... We still have our sea routes...and it doesn’t look like the enemy cannons are able to be moved, so...”

“Yes? Your point?” the commander in chief urged.

“Could we not...” the man continued, his voice an almost inaudible murmur. “Could we not move our base of operations?”

That’s not a bad idea... Frasier thought, but there was one serious oversight—Quintanal was the Holy Land for their sect. For that reason, the proposal was shot down, and the naive officer who had suggested it was reprimanded for not understanding the religious importance of the city. He hung his head, his eyes brimming with tears.

I understand how you feel, but there are some battles you can’t back down from.

Perhaps if the situation grew so dire that defeat was deemed inevitable, they would think up some excuse for the emperor alone

to escape the capital. They still had sixty thousand soldiers at their disposal, while the invading Belgarian Army was only forty thousand strong. It was unlikely to come to that, however—any Belgarians who tried to approach the city walls would be bombarded by the ships at sea, so very few Hispaniards saw the battle as unwinnable.

“I also believe we should meet them,” the commander in chief said and then sought the wisdom of the divine. “What say you, Your Majesty?”

All eyes gathered on Emperor Amador, who had up to that point listened in silence. Slowly, the old man nodded. “I shall permit it. To allow honest believers to die without so much as crossing blades with those heathens would be to concede victory to the Devil. Exterminate the nonbelievers.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the commander in chief replied. “We shall restore the peace, for you and for Quintanal!”

All at once, the officers stood and saluted. They would now relocate to another room, where they would work out the specifics of their plan. The emperor, meanwhile, was going to turn in for the night.

Frasier placed a hand on his chest. In his pocket was a letter that Mariam had given him before he left the house.

“Belgaria has fortified its camp and is flawlessly prepared. Its soldiers and firearms are far greater than ours, and we have no chance of overcoming them in a head-on confrontation. We must avoid an all-out war by whatever means necessary.”

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The next morning—

“Here they are, Regis!” Altina shouted as she pointed into the distance. A massive army was approaching from the direction of

Quintanal, which could mean only one thing—the Hispaniards had opted for a battle on the open plains.

Regis called over a messenger and said, “Prepare the artillery.”

“Yes, sir!” the man replied and raced off at once.

Regis had already established some fundamental tactics in the case of a head-on battle: First, they would thin the Hispaniards’ ranks from afar with their midsize cannons. Then, once they were within shooting range, the riflemen would commence their fusillade. Were the enemy to persist even then, the armored infantrymen would take the lead, intercepting their charge as the second line of riflemen opened fire.

It was not long before a report came in. “The Hispanian Army numbers sixty thousand! They’re leading with their cavalry!”

“I see...” Regis replied. “No change in our response. Fire once they’re within range.”

“Understood!”

Altina watched the runner disappear again and then muttered, “This is pretty...normal, isn’t it?”

“You’re right,” Regis replied. “They must have determined that they can’t win with their own guns and cannons. Their horsemen will charge in and attempt to take out our riflemen before they can do too much damage, then their foot soldiers will try to overwhelm us with their numbers. Since we have to protect our 120 Besiegers, we can’t do anything too innovative with our formation.”

“Are we at a disadvantage, then?”

“I wouldn’t say that. We created this situation in the first place by preparing those cannons, remember. It wouldn’t make sense for us to lose here. Especially when Hispania’s commander still fails to understand the might of our guns.”

“You sound confident.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, is all.”

“So you say, but there’s something bothering you. I can tell from your expression.”

Regis rested a hand on his face. *Well, with sixty thousand soldiers charging at us, I think I’m justified in being at least a little anxious...*

“I’ll admit,” he said, “there is one thing that’s been playing on my mind.”

“What’s that?”

Regis took a moment to arrange his thoughts before answering.

“They managed to outmaneuver us at Fort Barcedella. I was under the impression they had quite a decent tactician.” He had refrained from saying the young woman’s name.

“Is that so?”

“But they didn’t attack a single time while we were making the 120 Besiegers, and this is panning out surprisingly uneventfully. It’s as if they have no plan at all...” Regis muttered. Their opponent was much too naive if they thought their knights could succeed against riflemen.

“They very well might have a competent tactician,” Altina said, “but there’s no guarantee that they’re capable of commanding the entire army.”

“You have a point. Perhaps they were dismissed for losing Fort Barcedella,” Regis ventured. After all, Mariam was the daughter of the commander previously stationed there. If a power struggle had broken out, there was presumably very little she could have done to maintain her position.

“Well, maybe they’ll run away again,” Altina said in jest. “That’d make it an easy win for us.”

“Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Huh? Are you sure?” Altina asked, looking entirely lost. “I mean, if our enemy flees, we can easily conquer Quintanal.”

“Thereby prolonging the war. Imagine Verseilles was taken but Emperor Latrielle lived on—what would the officers do?”

“I, for one, would do everything in my power to liberate it! Latrielle wouldn’t even factor into my decision!”

“I may have picked a bad example...” Regis admitted. Belgaria now had a *généralissime* again, and, putting national sentiment aside, she was the most prominent symbol of the military. “This isn’t limited to Belgaria, but...an empire only loses a war when its living emperor surrenders to the enemy. The nation only falls apart when the imperial order is given to stop the fight.”

There was also a chance of an empire falling apart when the emperor was killed or committed suicide, but that largely depended on the state of the war. In situations where there was still an able command structure and the military remained strong enough to fight, the nation could persist even without its sovereign.

Altina paused to contemplate the tactician’s words. “Oh, so you want to snare the Hispanian emperor alive, then?” she asked.

Snare...

Regis had to question her choice of words, but she was more or less correct. He scratched his cheek and said, “We certainly don’t want him to run away, but it’s still too soon for that. He probably has his honor to uphold, so he won’t abandon Quintanal too readily.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know the best way to catch a fox? You put the delicious bait on full display while ensuring the trap itself remains unseen.”

“Have you ever caught a fox before, Regis?”

“I... No, but I’ve read about it.”

The cannons let out a thunderous roar; the Hispanian Army was now close enough for the Belgarians to start their bombardment. At the same time, the enemy horsemen broke into a speedy gallop. There wasn’t a single weak man among them—as expected of a vanguard unit in a time of all-out war—and they rode almost as nimbly as the knights of the Belgarian First Army and even the revered horsemen of Germania. Seeing them clad in full plate armor and moving as though they were one with their horses, it was easy to see why such men had once ruled the battlefield.

Of course, horsemen controlled the tide of war no longer. There was fencing stretched around the Belgarian camp, and although it was easily trampled down, it slowed the Hispanian cavalry for just long enough.

“Fire!” the commander of the riflemen ordered. A beat later, the guns thundered, and countless bullets bore small holes in the robust full plate of the vanguard.

“Ngh!”

“Gah?!”

The horsemen collapsed one after the next. Some groaned, while others dropped to the earth before they even had the chance.

Soon, another report arrived at the main camp: “We’ve defeated their two thousand horsemen!”

“Right.”

Regis was unsurprised by the outcome. They had pitted two thousand riflemen against two thousand horsemen, and with fencing and pitfall traps already in place, the shooters could reliably stop the cavalry charge.

As much as Regis disliked reducing men to figures, a simple cost comparison was enough to prove how much war had changed. Knights were trained from infancy. They needed to be taught to use swords, bows, and spears, and also how to ride a horse. They required full plate armor and a riding lance, and training warhorses that could withstand the roar of gunfire cost more than a commoner would ever make. In fact, it was said that the funds required to put a single knight on the battlefield were enough to sustain ten commoners for life.

In comparison, the latest firearms were a gold coin each, including the raw material costs. A commoner could earn this much in half a year, and the training required to wield one effectively took only three months. Even a farmer could end up becoming a competent rifleman.

The Hispaniards had authored their own demise from the moment they played their first hand. They had intended to use their horsemen to quash the riflemen, allowing their infantry to push forward, but their cavalry had stood no chance.

Still, the men marched on.

Regis had the first line of two thousand riflemen stand down and another line of two thousand take their place. There were six thousand riflemen in total and four thousand more in training. Not even High Britannia had a single unit with over ten thousand riflemen. Presumably, the ones in Belgaria's First and Fourth Armies were the only ones on the continent.

As the Hispanian foot soldiers marched on, they were made to endure an onslaught of gunfire they had never anticipated. Belgaria had an overwhelming advantage, but the Hispaniards still numbered sixty thousand, and their advance continued even as corpses littered the battlefield.

“Have the riflemen pull back and our armored infantry move forward,” Regis ordered. “Also, send a message to the Black Knight and Flying Swallow Brigades: ‘Fast soldiers are going to branch off from the enemy’s second line. Please take care of them.’”

“Understood!”

No sooner had they changed formation than the foot soldiers of the two armies collided. Hispania had the momentum of their charge and managed to push Belgaria back for a time, but the lines were quickly stabilized. Next, they attempted to make use of their numerical advantage by circling around the Belgarians on both sides, but these detachments were swiftly dealt with by the Fourth Army’s knight brigades.

Hispania’s main stage was the ocean, while Belgaria’s was the land. As the battle continued, these facts became more and more apparent.

“I think we’ll manage,” Regis said, letting out a deep sigh of relief, but Altina’s expression had clouded over.

“Our soldiers’ movements are lacking.”

“Are they? Do you think they’re exhausted from the expedition?”

“No, it’s because they’ve gone so long without a fight,” she said, sounding terribly irritated. “They’re having to think before they act, which is putting them a breath behind.”

“Well, there was no time for them to train while we were marching here, and we couldn’t have practiced on the battlefield.” At most, they had made sure that their lines were in order.

Altina clapped her hands together. “We’ll need to work some into the schedule next time, then! How are they fighting so poorly when the riflemen gave them such an advantage?”

“I’ll make sure to consider this in the future.”

The soldiers had already endured several real engagements, so Regis had never considered that they might be out of practice. It seemed that the creation of a proficient rifle unit had produced some unexpected results, although he was unable to notice them himself. His inability to wield a sword or spear meant that he could discern very little about a person's combat proficiency—even as he watched the apparently lacking men on the battlefield, his only thought was how strong they looked to be.

All of a sudden, Altina drew her massive sword, sliced through the air, and declared, "This is unacceptable!" Eric, her guard, watched with wide eyes, wondering what had just happened.

She sounds a lot like her master Balthazar... Regis thought in a fluster. He needed to stop her from racing to the front line.

December 31st—

The battle that decorated the last day of the year ended in Belgaria's victory. Hispania had fought with all sixty thousand of its troops, but even then, it was unable to achieve the results it had striven for. They had changed formation thrice, and on each occasion, their offense was dealt with in kind. The number of casualties had continued to increase, and come evening, when the Hispanian Army finally decided to retreat, it had already lost twenty thousand men.

Chapter 5: Mariam Ruiz Jiménez

“Mariam...” Frasier groaned as blood oozed from his bandage. “If this is the end for me, I want you to live free. I don’t have much, but it’s...it’s all yours. Now, I don’t care about his rank or his looks...but you have to find a man who’ll treat you...as any other woman...”

Mariam met her father’s words with an irritated frown, and she wound the next layer of wrapping a little bit tighter.

“Owowow!” Frasier cried out. “Be a bit gentler, won’t you?”

After heaving a sigh, she took the sheet of paper sitting on the table and scribbled out a message. *“You won’t die from a cut to the arm, Father.”*

“But it reached the bone, didn’t it?”

“No human has bones that close to the surface. And with the amount of meat on your arms, I’m sure you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Hold on. You’re... You’re not calling me fat, right? Mariam. This is an important question.”

“Here’s an even more important one: can you explain the details of that battle to me?” Mariam had placed red and white pieces atop a map of the area.

Frasier sighed, while his daughter seemed to be having the time of her life. Even in the presence of actual warfare, she never seemed even the slightest bit anxious—she took to it like a duck to water. Her late grandfather had always been just as vivacious whenever he spoke about battle.

It must run in the family.

Frasier took a seat and started to move pieces across the map. “We started pushing here, but when we tried to advance here, we were blocked.”

“How amateurish.”

“You think so? Seems pretty normal to me.”

“We should have attacked them at night—or on a rainy day, at least.”

“Don’t be so unreasonable. I’m pretty sure this was the first time we’ve ever mobilized sixty thousand men.”

In the dark of night, there would be no telling whether a unit was moving as it was supposed to, or whether it was even going along the right path. And in the rain, the commander’s voice would easily be drowned out. The battle would end up being the least of their worries.

“Simply gathering the soldiers together is a pointless endeavor. They need training. Ten thousand men cannot move the same as a thousand.”

“I know that, but what else could we do? Before this invasion, we never thought we’d need a land army sixty thousand strong.”

“Mm?!” Mariam suddenly grabbed Frasier’s hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why did you just pick up that piece?” she wrote. He had been about to shift one of the Belgian cavalry units.

“Why...? Because I saw it move. I was watching from the back, and I remember it well. There’s no mistaking it.”

Mariam urged Frasier to continue recreating the battle, so he moved a Hispanian piece toward the cavalry. It was strange, now that he thought about it—almost as if the order were reversed—but he remembered it clearly.

According to how the pieces moved across the board, the Belgianian cavalry had taken an advantageous position before Hispania's soldiers even attempted their attack. Somehow, the Belgarians had predicted what was going to happen and moved straight to where their opponent was going to be. It was understandable, then, how the Hispanian Army had suffered concentrated losses despite its numerical advantage.

"It really was tough luck."

"Father, did you knock your head when you fell from that horse?"

"That isn't what happened, and you know it. I was caught by a stray bullet."

"The enemy commander foresaw every move the Hispanian Army made."

"What?!"

"Well, to be frank, I foresaw them too. Our commander was so eager to strike at a weak point that Belgaria led them by the nose. Every weakness the enemy exposed was a deliberate trap."

"No... You can't be serious."

"Let me guess—they purposely created an opening right here in their ranks, but before we could even move, it was already filled."

"So, the next move too?"

"'Regis' is the name of their tactician, correct? He must be quite the coward, assuming he's the one taking command. He's terrified unless he creates the perfect script for his enemy to follow."

"The tactician? A coward...?"

"And the Hispanian Army is far too kind for having danced to his tune."

"Leave it at that. They're not just pieces on a board—they're brave men desperate to protect our capital."

Mariam froze; then, her shoulders dropped. *“Sorry.”*

Frasier scratched his head. “Well, they say they’re fighting in the name of our Lord and that being called back to him is a way of attaining forgiveness. It’s a release from all mortal toil, apparently. I’m sure they’re in heaven, stuffing their cheeks with food.”

Mariam offered no response.

“Oh, also—I carried out that scheme of yours. Picked a few of my men based on their faces. If all goes to plan, we’ll have the signal by tonight.”

“You always have been a talented man.”

Frasier chuckled. “Finally noticed, eh?”

“As expected of my son.”

“Oi. Quit it!”

Frasier found it uncanny how similar Mariam was to her grandfather at times, which made it all the stranger when she pretended to embody his spirit. She must have found it amusing to no end, however, as she was suddenly laughing to herself. It was only at moments like this that she looked her age. Of course, the fact that she was unable to produce the right sounds made it a peculiar spectacle, but Frasier was used to it by now.

Just as quickly, Mariam returned to her calm and collected demeanor. *“Our trap has been set, but that won’t be enough for the enemy to show weakness. The next step is equally as important.”*

“Yeah, well... About that. I really think we should inform His Majesty.”

“I leave that decision to you.”

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The next morning—

Exaggerated reports described the battle just past as an even trade—the Hispanian Army were said to have bested ten thousand foes and sacrificed a little over ten thousand in turn. The reality, however, was far more grim. Only three thousand Belgarians had fallen, while Hispania’s casualties were upward of twenty thousand. Now, the Hispaniards had lost their numerical advantage and even their precious cavalry.

After such a tragic outcome, the war council at the palace was deep in mourning.

“Furthermore,” the commander in chief groaned, “the Belgian *généralissime* has offered us a chance to surrender.”

After going through all the reports, the commander in chief stood in place, awaiting the emperor’s next words. The silence was unbearable, and the other officers held their breaths, looking as though they might asphyxiate. The atmosphere was made all the more dire by the occasional explosion that thundered in the distance—Belgaria’s massive cannons were destroying the city, and the risk that one might strike the imperial palace was all too real. Not even in the command room were they perfectly safe.

“Um...” Frasier raised his hand and was immediately met with looks of surprise. The amount of pressure he felt was beyond compare, but it was too late for him to back down. He took a moment to muster his strength and then said, “Truth be told, I set something up during yesterday’s engagement.”

“You *what?!*” the commander in chief exclaimed. He was reasonably outraged to hear that Frasier had gone off and taken action on his own without telling anyone, but the emperor held up a hand to take control of the situation.

“Very well,” he said. “Please explain.”

The commander in chief returned to his seat in a show of reverence. Now that Frasier was being urged to speak, he would need to stand instead.

“*Ahem...*” Frasier cleared his throat. “I picked out some of my subordinates with Belgarian-looking faces, dressed them in captured equipment, and had them infiltrate the enemy army during the free-for-all.”

“Oh?” the emperor said, his eyes narrowed.

“We managed to take a few of the soldiers who attacked Barcedella as prisoners, so we seized their equipment. We also got them to cough up a few code words, so our men won’t be found out too easily.”

These code words were a measure to prevent infiltration, and for that reason, they were known only to the Belgarians. Nobody seemed to have anything to say about the matter, so Frasier continued.

“I ordered those men to destroy the massive cannons, should an opportunity arise. Without those to worry about, we won’t have a need to leave the capital.”

“Well done,” the emperor said.

“Th-Thank you,” Frasier replied. He was honored to have received praise from His Majesty himself. “However, the action I’ve taken won’t be enough as it stands. The Belgarians are going to be wary of any attempts to destroy their cannons...which is why we’ll need to create an opportunity.”

Frasier felt his heart race as he started going into further detail. He expected someone to fly into a rage at any moment.

“If we want to sow chaos in the Belgarian ranks without losing any soldiers, I would, um... I would recommend dumping poison into that lake.”

“What?!” It wasn’t the emperor who cried out, but the commander in chief sitting beside him, his eyes wide with shock.

“Oh, no! That’s just one idea!” Frasier exclaimed, waving his hands about as he frantically backpedaled. “It was purely hypothetical!”

The other officers wore grim expressions. The lake near Quintanal was important to the city’s residents and to the prosperity of the country. Belgaria had occupied a famous orchard, the fruit of which was adored throughout the capital as a national specialty. Poisoning the water would cause so much damage that it would take months for things to return to normal.

“Very well,” the emperor said.

As expected, the officers were unable to conceal their surprise. “Um, Your Majesty... You’re approving of this?” the commander in chief asked. “But if we do that...”

“The Belgarians are heretics,” the emperor said plainly. “For what reason should we hesitate?”

Although some swallowed their breaths, not a single man refuted the emperor’s words. They stood and bowed their heads as the commander in chief replied, “It is an honor to partake in your wisdom. We shall drive our enemies from this Holy Land without fail.”

The emperor drew a cross in the air with his right hand. “May we never tarnish the divine will of our Lord.”

A chill ran down Frasier’s spine.

The emperor turned to leave, having made his verdict, but then stopped and turned back to Frasier, as if suddenly remembering something. “May I ask one thing?”

“Huh?!” Frasier exclaimed, taken completely by surprise. “Yes, of course!”

“Infiltrating the enemy and poisoning the lake... Were these your ideas?”

“Erk...”

Frasier was unsure how to answer. Naturally, Mariam was the one who had devised the plan, but it was so cruel in nature that he was wary of associating it with her. At the same time, however, he was reluctant to claim her achievements as his own. He could feel the sweat beading on his brow as the emperor awaited a response.

“It was...a divine revelation,” Frasier eventually said.

“Oh?”

“A voice gave me this wisdom as I prayed.”

The emperor gave three small nods. “It couldn’t possibly be mistaken, then.”

“Thank you!”

Frasier bowed his head, and with that, the emperor made his exit. Once he was gone, the commander in chief covered his face with his hands and groaned, “How could this be...?”

The officers looked at Frasier with critical eyes, but he was prepared for it. “It’s not like I’m doing this because I want to,” he muttered. “If we had won yesterday’s battle, this whole operation would have been unnecessary.”

He was right, and the other men in the room, unable to respond, could only hang their heads in shame.

✧ ✧ ✧

Three days had passed since the engagement, and the Belgian Army continued to bombard Quintanal with its long-range cannons.

After dinner—

Clarisse changed out the pitcher in Regis's tent. "The lake water has picked up a slight odor," she said, "so I made sure to boil it and add some fragrance."

"You didn't have to do all that," Regis replied, "but thank you."

"We've had more people coming down with an upset stomach lately. Make sure to look out for yourself, Mr. Regis."

"Yes, I will."

Although, now that she mentions it, I've been feeling somewhat feverish since yesterday. I thought it was just fatigue.

As Clarisse was about to leave the tent, another woman stepped in to replace her. It was Jessica, Renard Pendu's capable tactician. Tensions rose as the two locked eyes, but Clarisse only ever spoke to those she felt comfortable around, so she gave a silent bow and went on her way.

Jessica giggled. "Oh, how *very* scary..."

"Do you need something?" Regis asked.

"I was wondering if the Hispaniards have graced us with a response."

"We've given them the opportunity to surrender time and time again, but they haven't gotten back to us yet."

"Are our cannons truly that ineffective?"

"On the contrary, our reconnaissance says they've suffered considerable damages. A lot of civilians are hoping to leave the

capital,” Regis noted. Escape by ship was still an option, as Hispania’s sea routes were still thriving.

“In that situation, I would be right there with them.”

“Unfortunately, Hispania’s emperor has forbidden anyone to leave by ship.”

“Oh dear.”

“They lost a lot of men during our previous engagement, but there are still forty thousand stationed at Quintanal. Civilians are needed to support their livelihoods—to make their food and wash their dishes. They also make up their doctors, barbers, musicians...”

“We could do with a few of those ourselves.”

“Perhaps it would boost morale.”

In the Belgarian Army, cooking and cleaning were done on rotation. They were fortunate enough to have military doctors, but when it came to barbers, the men would simply cut each other’s hair with knives.

Jessica nodded. “Only a land as religious as this one could go this long without a revolt.”

“The harder things become for them, the more resolved they seem to get.”

“Will the emperor stay in Quintanal too?”

“For now, at least. He can’t flee alone, and abandoning the Hispanian Army isn’t an option, since he doesn’t have any other armies to turn to. Even if he did attempt an escape, there’s no way we could miss tens of thousands of soldiers on the move.”

Hearing this, Jessica pressed a finger against her lips. “I see... So is that why you overlooked the enemy army?”

“Huh?! I didn’t...”

“You easily could have decimated the Hispaniards in that battle, had you wanted to.”

“I wouldn’t want to see that...” Regis muttered. It had already been gruesome enough seeing twenty thousand corpses on the battlefield, let alone three times that number. It was more than just the quantity that bothered him, though.

“Either way,” he continued, “I can assure you—I go all out when I need to.”

“Good,” Jessica replied as she took the pitcher and poured herself some water. But when she brought the cup to her mouth... “Hm?”

“Is something the matter?” Regis asked.

“This water...”

“Ah. Clarisse added a fragrance of some kind to it. She mentioned that the lake water had started to smell.”

“That maid—she holds no grudges against you, does she?”

“Huh?!”

Jessica placed the cup on the table. “We might want to look into this. No, it might already be too late...”

“What do you—?”

All of a sudden, the lady doctor burst into the tent. “There’s trouble, Tactician! The soldiers are collapsing!”

“What?!” Regis stood up so forcefully that his chair tipped over, and the next thing he knew—“Huh?”—the ground seemed to sway beneath his feet. He collapsed not even a moment later.

“Tactician!” the doctor screamed.

“Aurick!” Jessica cried.

His dinner began to reverse course from his stomach, and the pain grew so intense that everything seemed to turn red. A moment later, a massive explosion shook the air, and three more soon followed. They were similar to the noises made by the 120 Besiegers, but something about them seemed...unusual.

There was a ruckus brewing outside the tent.

“Urghhhhhh...” Regis desperately opened his eyes to see the lady doctor and Jessica stooped down beside him.

“Stay with us, Tactician!”

“You need to vomit everything up! It lowers your chances of dying!”

Regis reached out to them and said with his remaining strength,

“Please...make sure...Altina is okay...”

Interlude

A girl stood on the balcony, basking in the glow of the morning sun. Her golden hair caught the light and glistened, as though a goddess had descended to earth.

Her name was Elize Archibald—or, at least, it was for now.

“I don’t want you making that face, Bastian...”

It was the day that Elize would depart for the south, and she spoke to Bastian with tear-filled eyes. After making her way through southern Belgaria with the Fourth Army, she intended to return to High Britannia, and with Bastian now being the brother of the emperor, he no longer had the freedom to accompany her.

“I’m not making a face!” Bastian protested as he wiped his eyes.

Elize giggled. “Smiles suit you best.”

“You’ve gotta look after yourself, Elize. Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Those should be my words to you—although I think we both know that you’ll do something crazy no matter what I say.”

“Maybe...”

“It doesn’t matter how strong you are, Bastian—if you depend on your strength too much, it’s going to fail you one day.”

“I know...” Bastian replied and scratched his head. “Professor Bourgine said the same. Wait, you’re really gonna lecture me to the very end, huh?”

Elize looked at him quizzically. “Should we talk about something else, then?”

“Ah, no. Well... Nah.”

“I’m more than willing to listen, no matter what it is.”

Bastian could feel a warmth rising to his cheeks. “It’s nothing. Really.”

“Now you’re making me embarrassed...” Elize said, her face equally as red.

“Wh-What’s your problem?!”

“We’ll meet again, Bastian. I’ll make sure we do.”

Elize held out her right hand. Bastian hesitated, then he placed his rugged palm over her slender fingers. “Yeah...” he said. “That’s a promise.”

“I’m counting on you to become someone great enough to meet with me.”

“And you’d better not fail, Elize.”

“Of course. Not after you and so many other people have helped me make it this far. I won’t fail anymore.”

“I wanted to help you till the very end, but...”

Slowly and tenderly, they both pulled their hands back.

“You must have your own duties,” Elize said. “I don’t want to get in your way.”

“Well, I do have to write my future masterpiece...”

“I certainly won’t be holding my breath.”

“Oh, come on. It’s gonna be an adventure so thrilling you’ll laugh your guts out.”

Elize could only giggle in response.

It was about time. Bastian placed a hand on his hip and exhaled deeply. “All right, the professor should be up by now. Let’s have breakfast. I’m going to miss your awful cooking, you know...”

All of a sudden, Elize collapsed onto Bastian and embraced him, wrapping her hands tightly around his back. “Oh, Bastian... Bastian...”

“Ah, err... Hey...?!”

“Wah... Waaah...”

“Elize...?”

“I’ve considered it so many times now—forgetting about my homeland and staying here with you. Just the two of us...”

“You really are...”

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Bastian was taken aback. “I’m...in the same boat. I was dreaming about how I’d take you to some other country far away from here.”

Elize stared at him longingly.

“But...you know.”

She nodded. “Yes, the future has been entrusted to me by so many.”

“And you can’t betray them, right?”

She nodded again and closed her eyes. “But just this one last time...Bastian...will you listen to my selfish request?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Bastian put a loving hand on Elize’s back. Their faces drew closer and closer, and as his lips finally met hers...

There came a metallic *thud*, and a sharp pain shot through Bastian’s head.

“Oww?!”

He shot up to find that he was actually in bed, and standing beside him was a woman who was most certainly not Elize. It was Franziska.

Back when they had first met, Franziska had been wearing light armor and toting a short crossbow—things befitting someone who was apparently from a renowned mercenary brigade. Now, however, she wore an apron and toted a frying pan.

“How long are you gonna stay in bed, Bastian?!”

Bastian let out a sigh. He had seen the same dream again—a memory of the day he had parted with Elize, even though several months had passed since. “Don’t hit me with the frying pan,” he said, rubbing his aching head.

“It’s your own fault for not getting up.”

“Can you blame me? I was up late reading.”

“Madame Bourgine’s already in the dining hall.”

“Seriously?! Gahhh! She’s gonna scold me again!” he yelled and immediately started removing his pajamas.

Franziska’s face flushed red. “Y-You idiot! Why are you getting naked all of a sudden?!”

“How am I supposed to change for breakfast without getting naked, huh?!”

“You’ve got a pure maiden watching!”

“Huh? Where?” Bastian asked. “Wait, no! Put down the frying pan! That thing seriously hurts!”

Five minutes later, Bastian arrived in the dining hall, rubbing his head again. On the breakfast table was a heaping plate of sausages and sauerkraut.

“Not this again...”

Bourguine smiled wryly from the next seat over. “After all that High Britannian food, it seems only natural that we should spend some time getting to know Germanian dishes. My, what a lively place this has become.”

Franziska began divvying up the sauerkraut, her face still bright red. “Well, Germanian food is actually tasty, right? I’d rather you didn’t lump it all together with that High Britannian stuff.”

“Sure, it tastes fine...” Bastian murmured. *But that doesn’t mean I want to eat it every day.*

“Bastian, are you heading out today?” Bourguine asked.

“Yeah, I’m still on track. Going to meet a western noble in Rouenne. I should be back by nightfall.”

“Let’s hope they’re on the same page.”

“Hope and pray.”

“How about I tag along?” Franziska suggested. “I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“You sure?” Bastian asked. “It might be dangerous.”

“I’m just worried you won’t be able to present yourself properly if you’re alone.”

“C’mon, I’m not that bad...”

“You know, even men can benefit from a little makeup.”

“Not happening!”

She pouted. “You’ve saved me a good number of times. I’m saying I want to help you back! It’s not like I can make it up to you with cash.”

“I guess not...” Bastian muttered. His grandfather was a marquis, and he himself was the younger brother of the emperor. He was never in need of money.

“So, instead, I’m gonna do this and that to help you stay devoted to your goal,” she said and gave a bitter chuckle.

“Thanks for that. I guess I’m counting on you, then.”

“You got it!” she replied with a forceful nod.

“There are a lot of people cheering me on,” Bastian declared, his fists clenched. “I need to give it my all.”

“I don’t really get it, but good luck!”

“Seriously? I’ve explained it so many times now.”

“True, true...” Franziska said, although she still seemed none the wiser.

“I want to establish a parliament in Belgaria.”

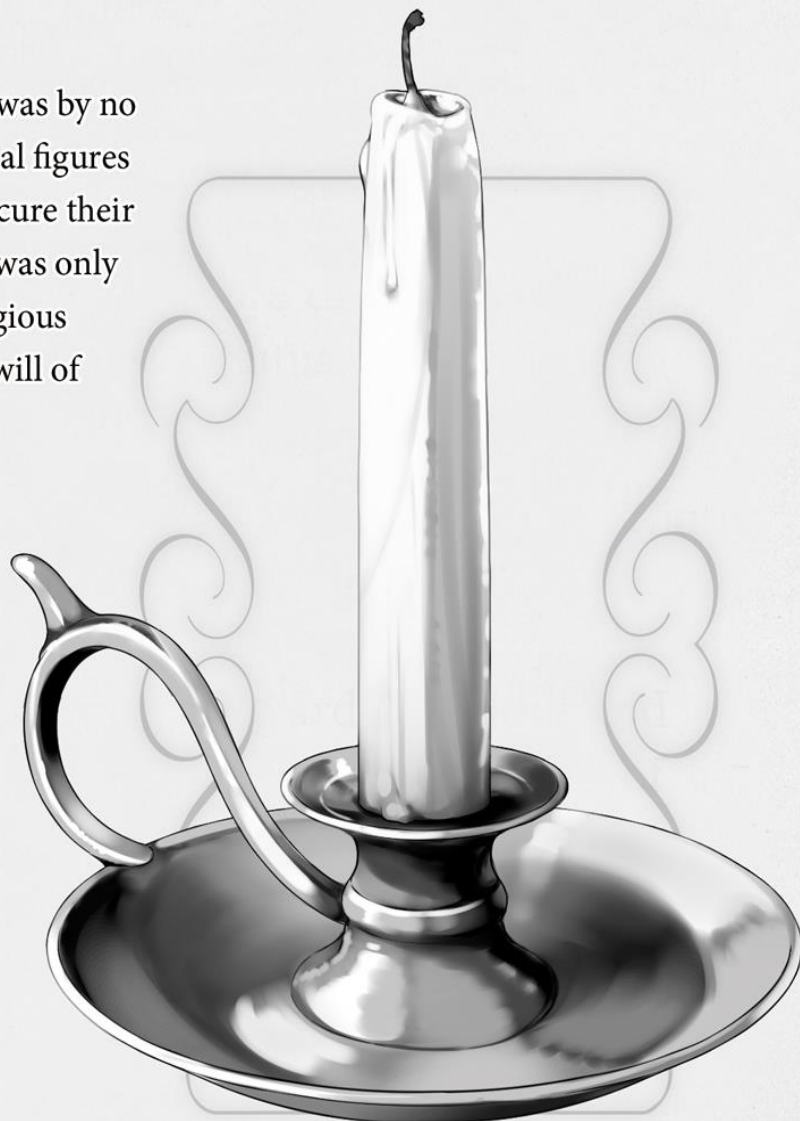
A History of the Belgarian Empire

Religion

Since its earliest days, the continent housing Belgaria has followed one religion, the name of which does not appear in this work. It preaches that a single God created the world and the life that inhabits it, and that a blissful afterlife awaits those who live righteously in accordance with His will. Those who live a life of misdeeds are instead condemned to eternal torment.

The creation of religion began with two fundamental, existential questions: why does the world exist, and why do humans exist within it? Some scholars suggested the presence of an almighty figure, and from there, rulers co-opted the idea and spread it throughout the populace. Each ruler found unique ways to justify their rule in the name of God, and thus, the religion propagated in many shapes and forms.

Of course, this subtle manipulation was by no means limited to Belgaria—the influential figures of many other nations also worked to secure their position and power through religion. It was only with their guidance that the various religious groups of a country could interpret the will of God and perform religious services.



Religion encouraged the tithe system, and not just on a monthly or yearly basis—donations were also necessary for nearly all important ceremonies, including marriages and funerals. The sum paid was often more than what was given to the presiding nobles who served as landlords.

Throughout history, there have been many who have spoken out against leading religious bodies, each with a laundry list of reasons. Sometimes, these critics even formed their own bodies known as sects. Although these sects revered the same God, it was common for them to become violently opposed to one another.

At times, humans would place their faith entirely in God, even when doing so warped their lives and stoked the flames of war. Religion became a great comfort to those who were over-worked and wanted reassurance of a better life and those who were struck by disaster and depression and needed something to raise their spirits.

To strive for psychological salvation is only human—peace of mind is an indispensable part of our daily lives. For that reason, religion lives on.

(This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons or organizations is purely coincidental.)



Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess XIV*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

I know I'm digressing already, but another one of my series, *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord*, has received an anime adaptation and is currently being broadcast to rave reviews. The animation is wonderful, and I would greatly appreciate you all checking it out. (There have been a few misunderstandings, but the anime is adapted from the rewritten light novel version, which differs quite a bit from the web novel.) Kodansha should be releasing the eleventh volume of that series at around the same time as this book.

Now, back to *Altina*. In this volume, the invasion of the Hispanian Empire has finally begun. I must apologize for one thing—I intended to write all the way up to the end of the war, but I didn't have enough pages. Mariam spent way too much time refusing to dress properly... That's a joke, of course, but I'll do my best to make sure you're not waiting too long for the next volume. Please be merciful to me.

I also have a couple more advertisements.

I'm continuing to work on *The Fourteen-Year-Old and the Illustrator*, my work-based comedy with MF Bunko based on the corporate world and centered around a fourteen-year-old cosplayer and a professional illustrator. Keji Mizoguchi has been working hard on the illustrations and assisting me with some of the planning for the light novels, while Kamelie-sensei is working on the manga adaptation with Cycomics. *Millennium War Aegis: The White Empire Arc* is also currently being published with Famitsu Bunko. I'm writing them both in earnest.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei, for so many wonderful illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Hishino-sama from Afterglow. You've done another bang-up job.

To my editor, Wada-sama. I thought I could change this year—that I could become someone who actually follows their deadlines. Once again, I'm sorry.

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 14!

Murasaki-san, Wada-san, illustrating this
series is always such fun. Thank you.



“Hah...
Hah... Hah...
Why did you...
leave me
behind...?!”

It was Marion.

“Because
you’re so slow.”

“It was time
for the meeting
and you still hadn’t
returned, so I...”

He averted his gaze with
a look of displeasure.

Black Knight
Jerome

Adjutant
Marion



*“His Majesty
fears
Belgaria’s steam
engine.”*

General
Frasier

Hispanian Tactician
Mariam



*“His
opinions
on the steam
engine are
irrelevant.
If we allow
Barcedella to
fall, Belgaria
will march all
the way to our
capital!”*

She watched the falling snow through the carriage window.

“It was snowing back when we first met.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t the sort that melted away when it touched the ground, though; it was a fierce blizzard.”

Bibliophagic Tactician

Regis

“I never knew it snowed **this** far south.”

“Thankfully, I accounted for bad weather when I did my calculations.”

Sword-Wielding Princess

Altina

ALTIINA

the Sword Princess





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by Yukiya Murasaki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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