Author: Yukiya Murasaki
Illustrator: himesuz



ALTINA
the Sword Princess
Loose Threads

Side Story

Author: Yukiya Murasaki
Illustrator: himesuz



ALTINA
the Sword Princess
Loose Threads

Side Story

ALTINA
the Sword Princess
Side Story



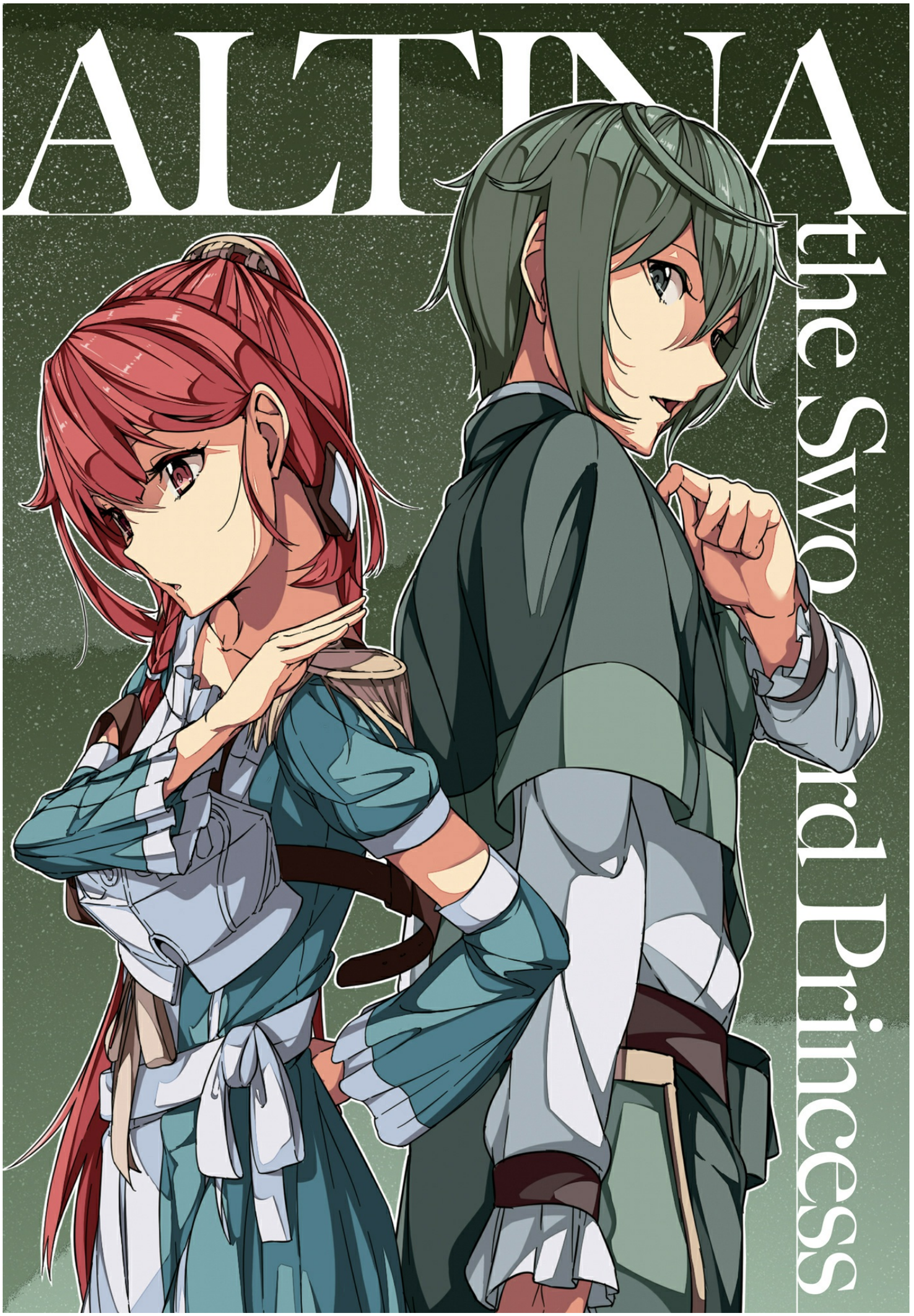

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis
Whimsical Maid
Clarisse
Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina
“Do I know of any books that might help at a time like this...?”
He closed his eyes and examined the humble library in his head, wildly flipping through page after page of all the books he’d ever read.
“Hm, I see... Yeah, I don’t have a clue.”
Clarisse sighed, though she did not voice any opinions herself.


Head of House Balzac
Eddie
“I take it you’re Le Dragon du Fer.”
Replacement Prince
Felicia
Felicia cradled the wounded Lillim, placing her on the bed. The maid continued taking short, pained breaths.
Head Maid
Lillim


Third Prince of Belgaria
Bastian
Heir to High Britannia
Elize
Son of House Tiraso Laverde
Roland
“These two are wanted criminals!”
“Th-This!”
“If you’re talking about the war declaration, we already know.”
Bastian shrugged.

ALTINA

the Sword Princess





TINA
Characters

Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is. She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

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

Regis Aurick

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





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

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

Elizabeth Victoria

A member of High Britannia's royal family who falsified her identity so that she could attend school as a normal student. Highly intelligent and a resolute pacifist, she is respected by those around her and even holds the prestigious title of honor student.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

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

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

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




MER
Grand Duchy of Varden
Fort Volks
15Li
Fort Sierck
8Li
Theonveil
100Li
Rouenne
Verseilles
Fort Boneire
Port
Ciennbourg
30Li
West
La Frenge
Queenstower
100ml
Applewood
Smiles Hill
Belgarian
Empire

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Characters

Map

The Eve

The Bibliophagic Failure

The Missing Wine

A Chat at the Bookstore

Inside the Box

Night Breaks

Another Day

Auguste, the Silver Princess

A Vow to the Morning Star

Bastian’s Story

Days at House Tiraso Laverde

Afterword

Bonus High Res Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



ALTINA
the Sword Princess

There once was a fourteen-year-old girl called Altina, a princess dispatched to the farthest border, and a book-loving soldier named Regis, a soldier who could neither swing a sword nor draw a bow. This is a story that takes place a little before their fates intertwined.

The Bibliophagic Failure

In the military academy, Regis Aurick really was the bottom of the barrel: swinging a sword put him at a considerable risk of slicing through his own feet, horseback riding always ended with him writhing in the dirt, and both a shield and spear were too heavy for him to carry. But above all else, the man was completely unmotivated—he would do nothing but read books whenever he had the chance, to the point that his instructors all unanimously agreed they had never before seen someone with so little promise.

Strategy training was perhaps his one saving grace—an area in which he remained intramurally undefeated up to the day he left. Some said that even the teachers were never a match for him. But war in this era required one to be proficient with a bow and spear, and with Regis having achieved such low marks in almost every subject that the grading criteria had to be updated to even account for them, he was certain he would never graduate, let alone become a soldier. That is, until a certain old noble graciously invited him to join his army.

Was it done on a whim? Regis couldn't help but wonder.

And so, he graduated from the academy, and at a prosperous young age was made a staff officer in the old noble's army. His employer was Marquis Thénezay—a man who did not have much in the way of military prowess but knew how to economize. He was a gentle soul, dearly loved by his people.

Regis initially thought he had been hired as nothing more than a chess partner, but it seemed the marquis truly believed he had talent. He was told to learn everything he could—to put his mind to use for the army and the Empire—and given full access to both the military library and the man's personal book collection. He also received a meager salary as an apprentice strategist, though a majority of what he earned went straight toward new books.

This arrangement lasted for around two and a half years, and while his days were busy, Regis found them to be terribly fulfilling. But all good things eventually come to an end...

The Missing Wine

“Erk. T-Too cold...”

Altina was shivering when she opened her eyes. Times like these were a stark reminder that she wasn’t in the capital anymore. Back in La Branne, the imperial palace, enough fireplaces were lit during the winter months that it was just as warm as spring.

I need to get used to it soon...

She sat up, her body weary, the cold air sweeping over her skin the moment she stripped away the thin blanket. Crude stone walls, a wooden plank ceiling caked in soot, and small windows that were anything but liberating—it was practically a jail cell.

All someone needs to do is lock that oak door and I really will be a prisoner.

At that thought, Altina suddenly grew anxious. She raced over to the door and gingerly pulled the handle. It wouldn’t budge. As her mind started to swim, she tugged it harder. Thankfully, this time it did indeed open.

“Phew... That’s good.”

“I wouldn’t say that, Princess. Are you not changed yet?”

Beyond the door stood an attractive brown-haired, hazel-eyed woman in a rouge maid uniform. She was Clarisse, one of the servants who had attended to Altina in the capital.

There had been a few others in Altina’s service, but when it was decided that she would be sent to the front lines, Clarisse was the only one who volunteered to accompany her. That said, the way she behaved suggested that she neither admired nor had any particular devotion to the princess. She truly was an unfathomable character.

“Morning, Clarisse.”

“You’re behind schedule.”

“It’s not that late, is it?”

“I thought you would look the part more if you woke up before everyone else, but the officers are already awake.”

“Ech... Okay, I get it.”

With that, Clarisse stepped into the room, firmly closing the door behind her.

Altina pulled off the gown she had worn to bed, leaving her body bare. She didn’t make a habit of wearing undergarments at night; the only soft fabric available was silk, which even nobles struggled to come by. From there, she wiped down her skin with the warm water Clarisse had prepared.

A white corset was then wrapped around Altina’s torso, serving not only to cover her chest and back, but also to cinch her waist and train her figure. As Clarisse pulled tight on the string that laced the back of the corset, it painfully strangled the princess’s stomach.

“Ghh. I hate this thing. It’s way too tight.”

“There isn’t much we can do about that, I’m afraid. I wouldn’t dare dress you as a gentleman.”

“Mn... You’re right. They’d laugh at me to no end.”

“I doubt that.”

“Really?”

“They’d just think to themselves that you’d gone mad.”

“That’s even worse...”

Over the corset went a dress that was also tight at the waist.

Now that she was clothed, Altina took a seat in front of her mirror. Staring back at her was a girl with red hair and crimson eyes—Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, fourth in line to the imperial throne.

It was madness; power struggles in the imperial court had resulted in a fourteen-year-old girl—a complete amateur with no real combat experience—being appointed the commander of Fort Sierck, one of the Empire’s most dangerous front lines located well away from the capital.

But it seems like the others are more opposed to this development than I am, Altina thought.

"I at least want to get along with the soldiers, but... they're all acting so distant."

"You've only just arrived," Clarisse said reassuringly. "There's no need to rush things." She stooped over Altina and started running a brush through the princess's hair, carefully parting the vivid sea of red.



“A commander’s someone you’re supposed to rely on, right? I think they’re treating me like some esteemed guest.”

“It’s because you’re so beautiful, Princess.”

“That’s not a compliment.”

“It really isn’t. Your beauty is what earned you so much envy in the imperial court, and now, out here, you’re regarded as a mere ornament. You don’t have it easy.”

“...What should I do?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine; they’re bound to warm up to you eventually. I mean, you’re so sweet, wonderful, and charming. You’re cute, my princess. You are very cute.”

As Clarisse continued to neaten Altina’s hair, her hand brushed along the princess’s cheek and down her nape. It tickled.

“Hey... C’mon, stop that. I don’t want to be coddled. I’m the commander. I want to earn their trust and loyalty!”

“Life might be harder out here than in the capital, but Princess, this fort is full of skilled soldiers and seasoned generals.”

“It is.”

“Which means it’s safe here—safer than anywhere we’ve been before. Perhaps you should make the most of that and just lay low.”

“I know what you mean, but...” Altina bit her lip. *That’s no different from being stuck in a jail cell, is it*?

✧ ✧ ✧

In order to earn the soldiers’ trust, Altina first needed to learn about the Beilschmidt border regiment. To that end, she decided to patrol the fort. She donned the minimal amount of armor over her dress and carried a longsword at her hip.

Certain circumstances had resulted in her leaving the capital with the massive *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, a gift from the emperor, but it was much too

troublesome to handle. The blade had been forged to the exact height of the first emperor, towering at 26 palms (192 cm). In the narrow confines of the fort, it would catch on walls, break things, and get in people's way. Thus, with practicality as her priority, Altina usually walked around with a regular sword.

Clarisse jubilantly tagged along. "Going for a walk, Princess?"

"It's a patrol. A. Pah. Troll. Get it right."

"Yes, a walk sounds lovely~♪"

"Grr... I'm starting to think I need to earn *your* respect, too."

"Perish the thought! My princess, I offer you my highest respects and complete devotion. I would offer up my very life if you told me to. In fact, just say the word, and I'll strip myself naked here and now!"

"That's really not necessary!"

"Fufu... Just know that I adore you."

Altina's maid, six years her senior, had been around for as long as she could remember. A normal servant knew to do their utmost not to displease their lord, keeping their utterances to a bare minimum and remaining as distant as possible. But Clarisse was a strange one. She always seemed to be joking around, though only when the two of them were alone; the moment someone else was around, she reverted to playing the part of a normal maid.

The moment they exited the central tower, they could hear rending cries echo out from the courtyard where the soldiers were practicing swordplay.

"Hryah!"

"Uryah!"

"Can't you attack any faster?! You're so slow, dragonflies could rest on the tips of your blades!"

"Sir!"

Be it for training or weapon maintenance, the soldiers acted of their own volition without the commander's input. They were clearly very highly disciplined. The only other army Altina had seen before was the refined and

sophisticated capital garrison, so she had to wonder whether all the border regiments were like this.

She continued with her patrol, going to the eastern ward where the officers lived; the northern plaza and front gate; and the barracks for the common soldiers in the west, which were the largest and most disorderly part of the fortress. Finally, she started making her way toward the storehouses and stables to the south.

When they reached the southern plaza, Clarisse raised her hand and pointed. “Looks like a dispute, Princess.”

“That it does! Let’s see what it’s about!”

In front of the storehouse, ten-odd men were glaring at one another. A few soldiers were screaming at a young knight, their faces so grisly that they might have been mistaken for mere street thugs had they not been wearing armor.

“Think ya got it all figured out, eh?! You sure act high and mighty, but how d’you know you didn’t just count wrong?!”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that it was stolen, and *you lot* are the culprits!”

“Get yer head outta yer ass! You blubbering knights, always makin’ nonsense accusations!”

“Bastard! To speak ill of not just me, but the proud Black Knight Brigade, too! Think over your next words carefully, soldier.”

The air was so tense that it seemed either man might draw his weapon at any moment. Altina ran over, took a deep breath, and... “Stop this at once!” she exclaimed.

What followed was silence.

“*Ahem.*” Altina cleared her throat, somewhat nervous. “It’s shameful to see the honorable men of our Empire baring their fangs at one another like rabid dogs. Why not tell me what happened?”

Did I sound enough like a commander there? I did, right? She couldn’t help but feel a little proud of herself.

The thug-faced soldiers grimaced, while the knight in black-painted armor

courteously lowered his head. “Oh dear... I do apologize for making such a ruckus. This is an internal problem—nothing worth the time of our princess.”

“I am not your princess; I am your commander. Please refer to me as such.”

“Ah, now that you mention it... Please, you must once again pardon my discourtesy.”

“You said this is an internal problem—that’s all the more reason for me to know what happened. I’ve been entrusted with this regiment, after all.”

“R-Right...”

“So, enlighten me.”

At the princess’s request, the knight reverently began to explain the situation. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Auber of the Black Knight Brigade, currently tasked with the management of this storehouse.”

With that, he held up the bundle of paper in his hands. It was a register, neatly detailing what should have been in the storehouse and what was permitted to be taken. The factory for plant-based paper had been set up fifty years prior, meaning paper had now propagated enough for even the masses to use in clerical work, but it had previously been as much of a luxury item as silk.

Altina tilted her head. “Why is a knight managing a storehouse?”

“That... Yes, about that. Our specialist is away at the moment,” Auber said, his expression bitter. By the look of things, he hadn’t taken up the position voluntarily. Given that he was a young knight, perhaps his seniors had shoved the role onto him. He then pointed at a particular entry on the register, outlining the problem. “This expensive wine is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Yes, the wine for officers—gone. The entire crate.”

“The entire crate?!”

“It would have been too heavy to carry alone, and that’s far too much to have been consumed by mistake. This is embezzlement, plain and simple!”

Altina’s eyes widened. Embezzlement. Theft. *Why, the misappropriation of*

military supplies is a serious crime!

"Oi, don't jump to conclusions!" came a throaty male voice. There were around five thuggish soldiers in light armor, and the one who seemed to be their leader stepped forward—the man who had been quarreling with the knight before. "Princess! Don't believe a thing that bloody knight Auber says!"

"Very well, then. Tell me your side of the story. Also, please remember that I'm your *commander*, okay?"

"Name's Deffand, head of the storehouse sentries. My men watch over this 'ere storehouse from dawn to dusk. Three four-person shifts. No way in hell a thief could get past us! Auber needs to get his act together; he's too new at this, so he's adding things up wrong!" the gruff man said with a scoff.

At this remark, Auber the bookkeeper let his anger get the better of him. "I'm not wrong!" he cried out. "Aren't the sentries the most suspicious?! They're the only ones with the keys to the place!"

"Dumbass! When stock goes missing, *we're* the ones who get punished! Why the hell would we steal it?!" Deffand yelled, eliciting various outcries of agreement from the soldiers behind him.

I see... Altina thought over the situation carefully. If Auber was to be believed, then the sentries would need to take responsibility for this mishap. But it was also possible that Deffand and his men were innocent, in which case the blame would probably fall on the temporary bookkeeper.

"Real sorry, but... can we leave yet?"

Before the exchange could devolve into another quarrel, three men who had up to this point been keeping quiet on the sidelines finally interjected. They were similarly clad in armor, claiming to be soldiers who helped move the supplies. Their representative introduced himself as Indri.

Then spoke another man, a middle-aged peddler called Trepner, who was known to frequent Fort Sierck. He had apparently come that day with cloth goods from the capital—curtains, tablecloths, clothes, and the like.

"My, oh my... This is troublesome. There is another deal that I must go and close. I would be ever so thankful if you could release me promptly."

Altina scratched her cheek. “Guess I should hear you guys out, too...”

✧ ✧ ✧

They began by establishing a timeline of events from earlier that morning. First, Trepner arrived with his cloth. He had hired his own porters but requested that Indri help him load his things into the storehouse. Auber had accompanied them with his register in one hand.

At the time, Deffand and his men were on guard duty. Deffand opened the door with his key, and as they were looking for somewhere to put Trepner’s goods, Auber noticed that the case of expensive wine he had placed there around half a month prior was nowhere to be seen. *“This has to be embezzlement!”* he screamed, thus initiating their quarrel.

“Does that sound about right?”

Auber the bookkeeper responded with a nod. “Yes, Princess. I swear I have not miscounted.”

“Princess, nobody would ever be able to sneak past my men,” Deffand, the head sentry, asserted.

Indri, having helped carry the goods, spoke up next. “In all honesty, Princess, I really don’t see how we factor into this.”

“Um, I’m being serious here, Princess. I need to get going or else...” Trepner interjected.

Altina scowled, conceding to the barrage of polite addresses. *Fine, “Princess” it is... Back to the matter at hand, though—why is the wine missing?*

“Hm, I see...” she mumbled. What followed was a long silence spent deep in thought, until eventually— “Yeah, I don’t have a clue.”

Clarisse sighed, though she did not voice any opinions herself. Whenever other people were around, she became as silent and reserved as any normal servant. She held her tongue and waited patiently by the princess’s side.

Even when Altina knew what she wanted to say, she had a hard time putting her thoughts into words. She could swing around a sword that was longer than she was tall, but arm strength wasn’t particularly useful when it came to

situations that required one to use their head.

“I-It’s not that I’m dumb or anything though, okay? No one else here has it figured out, so the question’s to blame! It’s just too complicated!”

Wait, of course! It’s a commander’s duty to make good use of their subordinates, right? So relying on someone smarter than me would actually be very commander-like!

With that thought, Altina poked her maid. “How about it, Clarisse? Maybe you know the answer?”

“...No.”

“No ideas whatsoever? You’re welcome to say whatever’s on your mind. Did anything stand out as strange to you?”

“Well, if you desire an easy solution...”

“Ah, yes! Go on! I’m all ears!” Altina was positively brimming with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, the four men all called out over one another.

“Is she being serious? Please, tell us!”

“Hurry up and help us out ’ere, would ya?!”

“We’ve got other work to do, so if you would...”

“Err, I really must hurry to my next transaction.”

Remaining completely expressionless, Clarisse raised a pointer finger to her neck, then jerked it along her throat. “The matter can be resolved at once by having them all executed,” she indifferently declared.

The men were at a loss for words. It certainly was an era where mass executions were considered a valid resolution to any ruler. The law offered practically zero means of protection, too, since nobles were allowed to issue punishment without trial within their territories. Such inhumane deeds were usually few and far between, as they elicited criticism from their populace and other houses, but there were some devilish lords who committed them regardless.

The young red-haired girl was both their commander and a member of

royalty, and who was to say whether her young age would prevent her from issuing death sentences so easily?

Met with so many pale faces, Altina drooped her shoulders and sighed. “I’m not doing that. Innocent people would get punished as well,” she said, dismissively waving her hand.

“Of course. My apologies.”

Clarisse apologetically lowered her head, and for just a brief moment—the instant before her brunette bangs dropped down over her face—the men could have sworn an amused smile spread across her lips. Not that it mattered. Altina had made doubly sure to emphasize that she wasn’t going to execute anyone, so they simply patted their chests and exhaled long, tired breaths.

Altina folded her arms, causing her gauntlets to clink against her breastplate. No matter how much she racked her brain, no solutions came to mind. “For now, how about we investigate the storehouse? It’s possible the wine box was just moved, or maybe we’ll come across a secret entrance of some sort.”

A Chat at the Bookstore

After graduating from the academy, Regis Aurick joined the marquis's army. In two and a half years, he had learned his job well, even becoming a fifth-grade administrative officer. His good fortune, however, would not last forever. On one fateful day, the news broke that Marquis Thénezay had died in battle.

"...He was such a good man, too."

It was the first time Regis had cried since his parents' funeral. He had been given some time off until the Ministry of Military Affairs finalized his next assignment, though he wasn't allowed to leave the capital. Doing so risked him being labeled a deserter, so in essence, he was being forced to sit and await his sentence.

He would presumably receive a demotion. One thing he was absolutely certain of, however, was that his next deployment would be near the border, on the Empire's front lines. Belgaria was currently at war with all its neighbors, barbarian invasions were becoming increasingly common, and civil wars continued to break out in the outer provinces; there were countless battlefields to choose from, and it was simply a matter of which one they picked for him to die on.

"Well... when you boil it all down, there's nothing I can do regardless of where they send me. As Girėnas wrote in *Merlot's Adventure*, 'No matter what trouble tomorrow may bring, why stop and lament it today?'"

And so, Regis headed to the bookstore as he usually did. It was a splendid two-story building facing the main road, its countless shelves holding as many books as would reasonably fit on them.

Just a few decades ago, books had to be copied by hand, making them valuables that only the upper echelons could ever lay hands on. The widespread distribution of paper had since brought about astounding advancements in the printing industry, however, to the point that books were now a form of entertainment accessible to the masses.

That said, those like Regis who spent all their time reading were still quite rare. While he claimed to be no more than an avid reader, he was quite certainly an eccentric book rat—*le rat de bibliothèque*, as they came to be known.

“Oh, it’s good to see you again, Regis.”

“Ah, the pleasure’s all mine.”

It was the woman behind the desk who had called out to him. She had pale skin, her black hair was styled in a shoulder-length bob cut, and she wore an indigo-blue apron over her clothes. Her name was Carol, and she managed this large bookstore that she had inherited from her predecessor.

“Are you looking for anything in particular today?”

“I was wondering if you had any *peculiar* books...”



“Peculiar? How so?”

“I’m in the mood to read something... different. Something novel.”

“Oh, so that’s what you mean. In that case, how about this one?”

“What’s different about it?”

“Well, the protagonist turns into a dog.”

“Hm... Oh, it’s a mystery novel...”

Their conversation was cut short by the sudden entrance of a man with a cape over his shoulders. He was a peddler, as was immediately identifiable by the large bags he carried and his shabby leather boots worn down by days upon days of nonstop walking. Those who lived in the city wore shoes, not boots, and normal travelers kept their bags small so they were easier to carry.

The peddler first bowed to Regis, who had come to the bookstore in his military uniform, and then to the shopkeeper. “Oh, it’s been quite some time, Mrs. Carol.”

“My, my! Trepner! Last I heard, you were heading north.”

“Yes, but I’m back now.”

“I hear they’re embroiled in pretty sizable battles up there these days. I was wondering why you’d opted to go.”

“Well, that’s precisely why! There truly is no better opportunity.”

“You never change, do you, Trepner? I’m glad to see you’re in one piece.”

“Yes, well... I almost came back in two.”

“What?!”

“No need to worry, though—I haven’t been decapitated just yet. *And* I have the money to pay for your wares. Wahahah!”

“Fufu... You’ll have to tell me all about it.”

It seemed this was not a tale to be shared while standing among the bookshelves. Carol ushered the man to the café space in the corner, even inviting Regis along as well.

“Care to join us? If you have the time, of course.”

“So long as I’m not intruding on anything...”

As it turned out, Trepner had been a good friend of Carol’s father. He traveled about selling a wide assortment of goods, having come to the bookstore to stock up on oddities.

✧ ✧ ✧

Three coffees were promptly brought out.

Back when books were expensive luxury items, there were two types of bookstores: those that displayed their books along the walls like art pieces in a gallery, and those that were essentially just cafés with bookshelves. For the latter, the books were simply a curious novelty to bring customers in, with the drinks being the main source of income. Custom orders and door-to-door sales were also common practices.

Likewise, Carol’s store had been predominantly a café before the books took over, and while its priorities had shifted, it had still retained some of its original functionality—although Carol prohibited people from taking books there before they were purchased.

Carol took a sip of coffee. “So, Trepner, why did you nearly lose your head?”

“Well, you see,” began the peddler, “a funny little thing happened while I was dropping off my wares...”

Regis listened in silence, taking the occasional sip of coffee himself. A box of expensive wine had been stolen from a certain warehouse—that much he understood. There was apparently even a dangerous individual present who threatened to execute everyone involved.

“But of course, as an experienced merchant, I knew it was only a joke. I didn’t panic in the slightest!”

“Fufufu... I see. How peculiar, though, for a whole box of wine to disappear. In a case like this, I think it’s more likely that the bookkeeper made a mistake.”

“I thought so too, you know. There was a similar uproar about missing goods the last time I was there. I don’t want to be the one to say it, but I don’t think

that knight is particularly suited to keeping books. Wahahahah!" Trepner's whole body shook as he laughed, jolting the table slightly and disturbing the coffee in all their cups.

"What do you think, Regis?" Carol asked, evidently passing the buck.

"Well... I'm not a detective, by any means."

"Don't be so humble. You're a strategist, aren't you?"

"Oh? Is that true?"

"It is! Regis here is a brilliant strategist," Carol declared, proudly puffing out her chest. "He became the staff officer of a marquis right out of the academy."

"O-ho! That's incredible!"

"Oh, please... I've already lost that position. I'm just an administrative officer now..."

"But you did such a wonderful job taking command in that battle the other day. I heard as much from quite a few people, you know."

"Ah, that's... I only made a few small proposals. I didn't take command or anything..."

"Hah. I'm not sure what I expected. Well, let's not talk about the battle for now. I'd really like to hear your thoughts on the disappearing wine though, if you're up for it."

Carol was looking at him with eyes full of expectations, while Trepner appeared sterner and more appraising. The issue was that Regis didn't have even a shred of self-confidence; over his many long years in the military academy, he was continually reminded just how incompetent he was. He had ultimately grown so used to being mocked that compliments made him sick to his stomach.

Regis struggled when put on the spot, but he also didn't want to disappoint Carol after all she'd done for him. "Do I know of any books that might help at a time like this...?" he mumbled to himself.

He closed his eyes and examined the humble library in his head, wildly flipping through page after page of all the books he'd ever read. He had

definitely seen a story like this before.

Then a thought crossed his mind.

“Um... I don’t think the bookkeeper is in the wrong here. High-class wine doesn’t arrive on the front lines that often, so I’d expect him to remember it. In fact, that’s precisely why the knight noticed it was missing to begin with.”

“Oh, good point!” Carol exclaimed. “Of course he’d remember something that rare, otherwise he never would have noticed it was gone in the first place.”

“Those were my thoughts exactly,” Trepner chimed in. “That’s why it has to be the sentry, right?”

“I’m not sure about that, either. The sentry was probably right when he said that he’d be the one punished if something went missing...” Regis replied.

“R-Right. Of course. He couldn’t have done it.” Trepner’s head seemed to be swimming as he tried to mentally work through the situation.

It was clear from Carol’s expression that she was thinking things over carefully. “That just leaves the soldiers who helped out, then... and perhaps even the peddler?” she suggested.

“What?!” Trepner cried out. “But the peddler... *I’m* the peddler!”

“Ahaha! Don’t worry. I was only joking.”

“Even so, it certainly wasn’t Mr. Trepner, else he wouldn’t go around spreading the story.”

Relieved as the peddler was, that left only one other option. “The culprits must be the soldiers who helped out, then!” he exclaimed.

“Hold on, hold on! Can we even really consider them in this?” Carol asked.

“The guilty party has to be among those directly involved in this situation,” Regis continued. “Military goods are stored in wooden boxes marked only with a registration number, so it would be hard to tell that one contained expensive wine simply by looking at it. The fact that they stole an expensive item without opening the other boxes means they needed to have already known the boxes’ contents, and those who helped carry them in certainly meet this criterion.”

“Ah, I’m starting to see what you mean!”

“Hm...” Trepner raised a contemplative hand to his chin. “But even if those soldiers who helped me were the perpetrators, we still don’t know how they managed it.”

That certainly was the biggest question on everyone’s minds. In an attempt to shed some more light on the situation, Trepner began describing the fort’s storehouse in more detail.

“*Ahem*. To begin with, the stone walls are 27 palms (200 cm) thick. They extend all the way up to the wooden roof, which covers the storehouse and keeps its contents shielded from the sun. The outside is patrolled by sentries, so it’d be difficult to approach without being stopped by at least one of them.”

“Quite the sturdy place they have there,” Regis commented. “It’s practically like a treasury.”

“Why, I reckon it wouldn’t even crumble under cannon fire.”

“What about the floor?”

“Oh, I did consider the possibility of someone sneaking in from underneath, but the floor consists of giant stone slabs made to hold no matter the weight placed on them,” Trepner said. He was now looking at Regis just as expectantly as Carol.

I wish I could give them an answer, but...

“Speculation can only get us so far,” Regis conceded. “As I said, I’m not a detective. It would probably be faster to speak to them personally.”

“Eh? Are you going to interrogate them?” Carol asked. “There’s no real guarantee they’re the ones who did it.”

“That’s no good, my boy. Torture does not a sincere confession make,” Trepner added.

“Even if you don’t ask directly, there are plenty of ways to get someone to talk. ‘He who gains without toil never forgets the taste; and so he repeats, even as its sickly sweetness brings him to ruin.’ That’s a quote from *The Dog and the Wolf: Of Virtue and Vice*, if I remember correctly.”

Regis had never even considered that this idle banter over some coffee would end up shaping his fate.

Inside the Box

Half a month later, in Fort Sierck—

Clarisse raced over with a preprepared receipt in hand, presenting it to the peddler Trepner as though she had just received the princess's signature. "My apologies for keeping you waiting..." she said.

"Oh, I should be thanking you. Your master must be quite the busy lady."

"Quite... The princess cannot often leave her room these days."

"Is that so? A real pity, that. It would've been an honor to admire her beautiful visage."

In the midst of their exchange, the item Trepner had transported from the capital was brought over to the storehouse. It was a wooden box as large as a coffin, and terribly heavy at that.

Once again, it was Indri and his men who would help to carry it inside, asserting that they always took the initiative because of how handsomely they were tipped for it. Granted, their reasoning did make sense.

Auber recorded that the goods had been successfully shipped, while Deffand and his subordinates erected a strict perimeter. It was the same old drill as always.

Before the box was set down in the storehouse, Auber nervously addressed Trepner. "Err... How should I put this... That thing you brought with you is, uh, incredibly expensive... Who was it that, um, approved this purchase...?" He was frightfully monotone, almost as though he were acting—and doing a terrible job at it, at that. Even a complete amateur could have put on a more convincing show.

Clarisse let out a sigh at this poor display, while Trepner regarded Auber with a glare, causing him to pale and weakly clear his throat.

"Yes, you're quite right!" the peddler dramatically declared. "This is a gift for

Her Highness, sent by a certain high noble! It's an incredibly expensive, one-of-a-kind statue!"

Presumably having concluded that there was no other way around it, Clarisse put forward the question that Auber was supposed to have asked. "A valuable piece of art...? Around how much would this statue fetch if it were pawned to an art dealer in town?"

"Hm, let's see... They could rip you off, and you still wouldn't get any less than a thousand livres!"

"My, that sure is a lot..."

Despite Clarisse's subdued reaction, it was a sum great enough to make the soldiers open their eyes wide. Their annual earnings were around twenty livres, meaning this statue was equivalent to at least fifty years' worth of work.

"Wahaha! It certainly is!" Trepner replied with gusto, turning to look at Indri and his two men. "That's why, my fine gentlemen, I ask that you please handle it with care!"

They responded with nods before slowly carrying the box inside, putting it off to the side and against a wall. Once it was in place, the trio all exchanged a look, discrete grins spreading across their lips.

✧ ✧ ✧

Late in the night—

As the storehouse was made with thick walls of stone, the temperature within didn't change nearly as freely as it did outside. These walls didn't just keep out the heat, they also blocked light and sound. Complete darkness, complete silence. The wooden box had been placed among the many food stocks and supplies.

Clunk.

There was a sound—the sound of one hard surface knocking against another. Then came a low scraping noise, and a streak of light pierced through the darkness. One of the large stone tablets that formed the floor had slowly been

lifted, a log set in place to keep it propped up. And from this newly formed gap crawled the intruder, the lantern in their hand showing them the way.

“Oi... Raise it higher. We won’t be able to get the box through otherwise.”

The stifled voice belonged to a man—Indri, to be exact.

“How about we just ditch the box?” suggested his comrade beneath the floor.

Indri shook his head. “No can do. Not even the stone walls and iron doors would mask the sound of us pulling out the nails. Just crank it up some more. As high as it’ll go.”

There was a dull grating sound, like a pestle grinding against a mortar. The log began to spin, slowly raising up and pushing the stone slab with it. Eventually, Indri deemed it high enough, and the other men slipped out to join him. There were three of them in total.

“All right, pick up the goods and get out.”

“Hoorah! A thousand livres, here we come!”

“After we sell this bad boy, we won’t have to work another day in our lives. No need to return to the bloody military.”

The men shared a quiet chuckle as they placed their hands on the box. But as they hoisted it up, something inside began to shake.

“That’s as far as you go!” came a female voice.

The lid was suddenly thrown off, hitting the ground with a violent crashing sound that reverberated through the storehouse. The men all frantically took some distance.

“What?! I... *What?!*” Indri yelled, his voice weak. The other two men looked around in mutual confusion.

A slender leg was sticking out from the box that was supposed to have contained a statue. Whoever was inside had evidently kicked off the lid. The leg sunk back in, then a figure slowly rose up and stepped out.

The lantern’s light revealed the silhouette of a young girl. She had a slender waist, a reserved chest clad in a breastplate, slender arms equipped with thick,

sturdy gauntlets, and a delicate nape. The shine in her ruby eyes accentuated a face that would be worth far more than a thousand livres had it been carved in stone, and the hair she ran her fingers through was even redder than their lantern's flame.

For a moment, the men seemed to be appraising her, having completely forgotten where they were.

"Hm, I see..." spoke the female voice again. "You had an underground tunnel, and you used a construction site jack to raise a stone slab in the floor."

"You... little..." Indri tried to snarl, but his voice barely even came out. Of all the people who could have found him here, it just had to be his commander, the imperial princess. He couldn't talk his way out of this one.

Why would someone of such high standing deliberately hide in a coffin?!

The girl regarded the three men one by one. "You offered to help load goods into the storehouse, not only so that you could see which ones were the most valuable, but also to ensure nothing was ever placed on top of your secret entrance. Am I right?"

"Grr..." Indri gritted his teeth. The strength immediately drained from his shoulders, causing them to violently slump down, and a weary sigh escaped him. "Yeah, you've got that right, Princess. Don't tell me you'd already suspected we were behind it."

"Turns out that peddler Trepner knew a skilled strategist, you see. He was able to guess the culprits from just an explanation of our situation, even suggesting how to catch them in the act."

"I see... Guess it takes all sorts, huh? You sure there wasn't something else he said to you, though? A warning, maybe?"

"Why would I need a warning?"

"Because, Princess... you're no match for us alone!"

With that, Indri drew his dagger. The two men accompanying him similarly pulled swords from their waists.

"Are we seriously doing this?!" one asked.

“She’s a p-princess, right?!” the other stammered.

“It doesn’t matter *who* she is! Just kill her and run! We haven’t got a choice!”

As the trio took their stances, Altina heaved a sigh. “That strategist... He really was right about everything. And here I was, hoping that I wouldn’t need to use it...”

She stooped down, reaching her hand into the crate to grab what she had brought with her. Had she been alone, there would have been no need to use such a large box. Plus, her weight certainly wouldn’t have explained why the men had shed so much sweat trying to move it.

What had weighed down the box was something else entirely—an artifact with a solemn steel edge, several times larger than any ordinary sword and even taller than the girl now gripping its hilt.

In one smooth movement, Altina held up the massive *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*. The relief carved into its mirror-like blade made it clear that this was the sword of a conqueror.

“Are you not soldiers?” the princess asked. “It’s your duty to protect the Empire, yet you steal the army’s equipment to sate your personal desires?! Don’t think you’ll get off scot-free!”



“Gh... Don’t back down!” Indri yelled. “Do you seriously think she can attack with that thing?!”

“W-We’ve got no choice!”

“Don’t lose your nerve! She’s just one woman!” Indri growled. “We’ll slaughter her and run!”

The men readied themselves, then charged toward Altina. They were very evidently flustered, but that didn’t change the fact they were soldiers of the Belgarian Army, which was notorious for its strength. There was no denying that their attacks would prove deadly.

Thankfully for the princess, the emperor’s regalia boasted an overwhelming advantage when it came to reach. Before the men could even get close, its silver edge was right before their eyes.

“Hyaaaaaah!”

A single sweep of the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*’s trystie-forged blade, aimed at their torsos, made quick work of the three thieves. Granted, she had struck them with its flat rather than its edge.

Night Breaks

By the time someone reacted to all the noise and the sturdy iron door was opened, the three men were unconscious. They were badly bruised with some fractures, but their lives weren't in any apparent danger. The head sentry Deffand ordered his men to tie them up.

"Princess!" Clarisse immediately rushed over to Altina.

"Aha! I did it! The plan was a huge success!"

"Are you injured anywhere?"

"Of course not. As you can see, there isn't a scratch on me," she replied with a smile.

Clarisse let out a deep sigh. "You know, there was no need for you to do this yourself... You could have asked any of the skilled knights at the fort."

"But doing it myself was a lot more commander-like, don't you think?"

"I am certain that I mentioned this before you climbed into the box, but I do not believe this is what a commander's job normally entails."

Clarisse was usually so reticent when other people were around; the fact that she was speaking so freely went to show just how worried she must have been.

Altina proudly brandished her treasured sword. "It's important to take the initiative, doing the most dangerous, troublesome, and exceptional tasks yourself. That's how you get people to follow you. I can't just sit back and let other people protect me, otherwise they'll just see me as a princess through and through."

"But Princess, you *are* a princess."

"That's true, but... I want the soldiers to respect me. To believe in me."

Clarisse hung her head. "I already believe in you. There was no doubt in my mind that you would defeat such petty thieves, but... why risk getting injured over something like this?"

“I’m fine, really. But I’m sorry that I worried you.”

“As long as you’re truly okay, that’s enough for me.”

With that, the maid returned to her usual blank expression. Truth be told, Altina much preferred it when she smiled, but there was nothing more she could expect with so many people around.

Trepner eagerly rubbed his hands together, lavishing the princess with flattery. “How utterly magnificent! To be not only beautiful, but a master swordswoman! As expected of a member of royalty!”

Altina was all too used to receiving such empty compliments, simply returning him a courteous smile.

Deffand came over next. His expression was so gentle that, for a moment, she failed to recognize him. “Hey, Princess! Thanks a bunch for your help! Quite nearly had my head on the chopping block there...”

“Who would have guessed they had something like that hidden beneath the floor?” she replied. “Thankfully, that means we have no reason to criticize the earnest sentries for doing their jobs.”

While Deffand continued to thank Altina again and again, Auber the bookkeeping knight lowered his head. “You have my gratitude as well, Princess. And Sir Deffand... I apologize for ever having doubted you.”

“Oh, uh, really? Don’t sweat it. I was a little too harsh myself...”

The two men were on better terms than ever before. It was a refreshing sight, to be sure. Altina heaved a relieved sigh and set her sword on the ground.

With that, Clarisse shot the princess a silent glance. Her eyes seemed to ask, *“Is something the matter?”*

“How should I put this...” Altina began. “I was just thinking how impressive this whole thing was. To think there’s someone out there who can bring about this sort of resolution just by hearing a few details...”

“Yes. Quite.”

“Hey, Clarisse... Don’t you think I could get at least a little closer to realizing my goal with a strategist like that by my side?”

“I wouldn’t know unless I met him.”

“Right. In that case, I’ll arrange for just that. We’ll meet, we’ll talk... I wonder what sort of person he is. Come to think of it, I didn’t even ask for his age. Is he an old man, perhaps?”

“Considering your position, Princess, I doubt a truly wise man would speak his mind.”

“Ah, you’re right...”

Altina was fourth in line to the Belgarian throne and commander of the Beilschmidt border regiment; it was rare to find someone who would speak honestly and openly with her, especially when they were smart enough to know better. Perhaps their interaction would be no less diplomatic and superficial than the smile she had given to the peddler.

“Hm... I’ll have to think of some way to get him to open up around me. Clarisse, think of some ideas as well.”

“Certainly. But if you *are* able to fool this person, Princess, would you really want them as your strategist?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing...”

All of a sudden, Altina clapped her hands together in realization. “That’s it! I know how to make him speak his mind!”

“Please go on.”

“Fufu... Well, you see...”

Altina exuberantly whispered in Clarisse’s ear, but her words prompted a frown from the usually stone-faced maid.

Another Day

Carol was in her usual position behind the desk when a familiar face walked into the bookstore. “Good morning, Regis. Erm... Are you all right?”

“Are you inquiring about my sanity or my future? I’ve already given up on both.”

“I’m *inquiring* about your health! You should take a look at yourself. Those are some terrible bags under your eyes.”

“Ah, yes... The book I purchased the other day was so interesting that I was completely absorbed, neglecting to eat or sleep. And here I am, hoping to see whether the author has written anything else.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, but I really don’t want to be responsible for your death.”

“Ahaha... How could selling someone a book possibly k—*ack*!”

He was stopped mid-sentence by a sudden coughing fit.

“Regis?!”

It was in the midst of all this that another familiar man raced over. “B-Big news!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, Trepner!”

The peddler’s face was pale. Just the other day, he had been so happy and openly thankful for Regis’s assistance in capturing a thief at the northern fort.

“*Hack, hack...* Did something happen?” Regis asked as Carol gently rubbed his back. He was preparing himself for the worst.

Trepner’s next words came out much gruffer than usual. “The northern forces are invading!”

“I don’t like the sound of that...” Carol murmured, a shadow falling over her face. “Is it another war?”

“You guessed it! Gah, what am I doing?! I can’t just stand about at a time like this! Oil is seriously hot right now! I need to head north and sell as much as I can!”

Trepner’s merchant soul was ablaze, but Carol grew anxious at his remark. “Isn’t that dangerous?” she asked.

The remote frontmost lines were always engaged in some war or another, and as a result, many of those stationed there never returned. Regis recalled all the conflict in the distant north, then muttered to himself.

“That’s sure to be the sort of place I’ll be sent to die...”

Unbeknownst to him, it was around two months later, on his way to the Empire’s frontmost lines, that he would come to meet Altina.

Auguste, the Silver Princess

ALTINA
the Sword Princess

A young man called Regis, who could neither swing a sword nor ride a horse, was dispatched to the front lines, and it was there that circumstances led him to take up the position of strategist. The commander of his regiment, none other than Fourth Princess Altina, asserted that she would become empress, driven to reform a nation plagued with constant wars. And in order to support her, Regis devoted yet another day of his life to desk work.

“Urgh... My eyes are going numb...”

He had burned through many a candle over the night, yet the mountain of papers before him hadn’t even halved in size. It was surely almost noon by now.

Regis needed coffee, so he popped his head into the dining room meant only for commissioned officers. He would not normally have been permitted access, owing to him not having been commissioned himself, but being Altina’s strategist meant he was granted special permissions. While he wasn’t necessarily encouraged to exercise these permissions, the rank-and-file soldiers were reluctant to eat around a staff officer in the standard mess hall.

That said, a majority of the commissioned officers were nobles, so a commoner like Regis similarly felt irreverent whenever he was among them. In the end, he did his best to avoid standard meal times altogether so that he wouldn’t need to eat with anyone at all.

It was already past breakfast time, so the kitchen was busy at work preparing for lunch. There were no officers to be seen, and the only other person present was Altina, who sipped her tea alone while looking over a sheet of paper.

“Oh, Regis. Good morning.”

“...Good morning, Altina.”

Regis would have addressed her a little more respectfully had there been others around, but since it was just the two of them, he was acting somewhat more casually—at her request, of course.

“Wait, hold up. What’s with that terrible face?” the princess asked.

“I’m aware that I’m not particularly handsome, but do you really have to be so blunt about it...?”

“Not what I meant. I take it you stayed up all night again?”

“So much to do, and all...”

“You need some sleep, Regis.”

“I know, I know. I’ll make sure to call it a day before I pass out...”

“Yes, of course. Everything’s fiiine as long as you’re not passing out.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, really. I’m making doubly sure that I’m filling out all the forms correctly.”

“I think you’re missing the point,” Altina said with a sigh.

Regis cocked his head in confusion. “Well, just know that I’m doing fine. Are you still reading that?”

“...Yeah.”

The item in Altina’s hands was a letter from the second prince, Latrielle. He was her half-brother, with the two sharing the same father, but he was also the man who had assigned her to command the faraway border regiment. The letter didn’t contain anything entertaining enough to make Regis want to read it again—in fact, he found its contents rather depressing.

“He used to be pretty kind, you know...” Altina muttered.

“The prince?”

“When we were kids... we’d drink tea together, from time to time. Practice our swordplay too.”

“Is that so? Well, I suppose the royal family is still family.”

“It was him, Bastian, and me. But Bastian had a habit of acting out, so Latrielle was always shouting at him.”

“Hm... That’s the first I’m hearing about this. Acting up in what sense?”

“He’d turn over all the statues in the courtyard, or carry a cow up onto the roof of the stables. We were kids, mind you; he’s settled down now.”

“Huh...? No, that’s... I mean, just think about it—that sounds flat-out impossible. Did he have a band of misfits helping him or something?”

“No, that was all just Bastian. Incredible, right? He’s really strong. In fact, he has more brute strength than Latrielle, despite being eight years younger than him.”

“I... The age gap really isn’t what makes this so impressive. A normal human being wouldn’t be able to move a solid statue or carry a cow by themselves.”

“Really?”

Was there something special in the blood of the Belgarian royal family? Did they have a secret training regiment, or perhaps a special diet? Regis couldn’t even begin to fathom the explanation. But now that he thought about it, Altina’s ability to swing around a sword of such unwieldy length was rather strange as well.

“Everyone around me was so strong that I never really thought anything of it,” Altina continued. “Well, everyone except Auguste, that is.”

“The first prince? I’ve heard he’s very sickly.”

“Yeah. His condition is so bad that we’ve barely ever spoken before. He’s always in his bed, usually asleep.”

“If he were healthy, he’d probably be emperor by now,” Regis commented. *Perhaps then there wouldn’t need to be all these pointless struggles for power, and the Empire would have achieved a more stable rule. So long as Auguste wasn’t a fool, at least...*

“Hey, Regis... Do you know anything about Auguste?” Altina asked, broaching the very subject on his mind.

“I think you’d know more from having lived in the palace. As a commoner, the information I have access to is a lot more limited.”

“That’s not true at all. Remember how I never knew about that embarrassing nickname?”

“Right... The Arrow-Sparrow Princess, was it?”

Just hearing those words caused Altina to furrow her brow. Having witnessed her duel against the Black Knight Jerome, the soldiers at Fort Sierck wouldn’t call her that anymore, but she was most likely still being mocked in the capital.

“Enough about me,” Altina said, promptly moving the conversation on. “Please, tell me about Auguste.”

“Well, let’s see... I’m not that knowledgeable about the imperial court, but...”

Crown Prince Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria, first in line to the Belgarian throne, was feeble from birth—so much so that he couldn’t even take public office. As if that weren’t bad enough, his mother was the second consort; tradition and law stated that he was to be emperor, but there were many who voiced their dissent.

Auguste’s opposition, Second Prince Latrielle, was born from the empress consort. He had the support of many influential nobles and had effectively seized the highest commanding authority in the military.

“...And there were those rumors of assassination,” Regis continued.

“Yeah. I... saw him being carried away. There was a lot of blood.”

It had happened the summer of the previous year. On his way back to his room after a banquet, Auguste had suddenly coughed up blood and fallen unconscious. His weak constitution was common knowledge, but his symptoms worsened so rapidly from that point onward that word quickly spread he had been poisoned.

“The official record states that he collapsed from illness,” Regis said, “but whatever the case... Prince Auguste has not been seen since.”

“You used to at least see him during ceremonies, but now he sleeps even through those.”

“There’s another rumor going around, too...”

“Another rumor?”

“That he’s already passed. That’s what some people say, at least.”

Altina tilted her head. “That’s a bit of a stretch. I’ve met him a few times since he collapsed.”

“Oh, I see. Then it must just be another delusion. Right, of course... Had the prince truly passed away, the second consort would no doubt have grown desperate, but I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“Why would she grow desperate?”

“When a consort fails to produce an heir, her standing weakens. The second consort isn’t as young as she used to be, so there’s a high chance she’d be transferred to a villa far away from the capital. From there, it would be tough for her to even meet with the emperor.”

“I see. That’s what happened with my mother,” Altina said. As a woman who carried commoner blood, she had no prominent backers and no place in the court. The princess fell into thought for a moment. “Mn... Now that you mention it, though... it’s starting to bother me.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve met with Auguste, but we’ve never sat down for a proper conversation. His eyes were as red as I remember them, his hair a beautiful silver... but he was either sitting in his chair or lying in bed, and in both cases, I wasn’t allowed to get close to him. They said I might catch it.”

“His disease is contagious?”

“I don’t know, but I heard that his sister caught it as well.”

“Fifth Princess Felicia...” Regis muttered. “She’s currently recuperating in the countryside, right?” Thanks to that, there were doubtful whispers going around that the second consort’s blood was defective.

“Felicia was born when I was around six months old. She’s a bit of a strange case, that one.”

“How so?”

“She’s no good when it comes to using a sword—in fact, she doesn’t seem to have any interest in weapons at all. She prefers laid-back songs and books. How can I put this...? She doesn’t have any drive. She doesn’t have that *oomph* to her.”

“Altina... that sounds pretty normal.”

“Huh?”

Around that time, Regis and Altina were on the distant northern front, essentially in exile. They had no way of knowing that an assassination plot

against Auguste was underway as they spoke.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Belgarian capital, Verseilles, was spread across a gently sloped plain. It had no high, protective walls, so its beautiful townscape could be gazed upon in full even from afar. At its center was La Branne, the imperial palace—an imposing white structure that looked much like a cross from above, with four gardens and a large park out front. In terms of size, it was about as large as a small village.

The palace was not only the residence of royalty: it was the very core of the nation, where political and military matters were discussed and decided. It was surrounded by the estates of powerful nobles, but not just those who were based around the capital—there were also numerous villas owned by nobles from distant provinces.

While there were no walls isolating La Branne from the rest of the city, there were guards stationed all throughout, meaning it was always under strict surveillance. Commoners who attempted to set foot on its grounds were stopped within ten paces, then promptly surrounded in the case that they were armed.

To the north of the palace's white plaster walls and indigo roof was the annex where Crown Prince Auguste resided—a cylindrical, four-story building nicknamed the Volière. Its highest floor, constructed as a hemisphere, had paintings hung on its curving walls, and a splendid chandelier dangling from the flat middle of its ceiling. There were four large windows, all drawn with thick curtains, making the room as dim as twilight even during the day.

Placed atop a tanned hide rug was a golden vessel, filled to the brim with crystal-clear water. The master of the room stood before it.

"Phew..."

Their pale fingers submerged a silk cloth, lightly wringing it out before tracing a path across their own slender neckline. They next washed their white cheeks, sickly shoulders, and fragile arms, eventually coming to a chest bulge that had grown increasingly difficult to hide as of late.

“Nn...”

The cold water caused their nipples to prick up—even more of an inconvenience. In this state, it would take even longer to ensure that everything was appropriately hidden.

All of a sudden, one of the two doors to the room—namely the smaller one reserved for servants—swung open. In barged a child, standing bolt upright and dressed as a maid. Her name was Lillim. She had tanned skin, and her black hair was bunched into two loose pigtails.

“Dear, dear, Auguste! You’re still messing about with that water?!”

“I only just started...” came a grumbled response. The voice was that of a young girl, as was the body being dampened with a cloth; while this person was proclaiming to be Prince Auguste, there was no doubting that she was in actuality a woman.

She turned away from Lillim. “Wipe my back down.”

“I suppose I should.” The maid approached with a sigh, then began rubbing the damp cloth against Auguste’s pale skin. “We really must hurry up. There’ll be much hell to pay if someone else comes in and sees you like this, especially Prince Latrielle. We’d both be hanged on the gallows!”

“...Yeah.”



Lillim reached out her hand, brushing aside Auguste's silver hair to wipe her nape. "Is the water too cold for you?"

"Yeah. It's cold..."

"It was warm when I brought it here, you know. What have you been doing all this time?"

Auguste's gaze flitted to a book on the bedside table.

"Reading fairy tales again?" Lillim asked. "I very much understand that you are bored, but you must ensure that you are dressed on time!"

"That tickles..." Auguste wriggled as her bottom was lightly washed, eliciting an unamused frown from the maid.

"Well, I can't wipe too forcefully, or else your skin will redden."

"I don't care... Nobody's going to see it."

"For now, perhaps... but Her Highness would certainly scold me for it."

Every maid assigned to the Volière had been handpicked by Auguste's mother, the second consort. Tending to the prince was their second most important order, the first most important being to acknowledge that a young girl *was* said prince. At this point, Auguste doubted that the maids even knew the girl's real name. She wasn't interested enough to grill them about it, but it did wonders to drag down her mood.

"I'll do the rest myself..." Auguste said.

"Very well. I shall fetch you your clothes."

Auguste wiped down her legs, pulled up her undergarments, and strangled her chest in thick cloth; to avoid the risk of any female items being spotted in the laundry, she wore only clothing that was designed for men. She then passed her hands through the sleeves of what Lillim had brought over—a predominantly blue military uniform, the gold and silver ornaments of which were drearily heavy, as though they were shackles and fetters.

"Do I really have to wear this...?"

"The Ministry is sending the new head of the garrison over around noon. You

must be properly dressed.”

“He’s just going to recommend that I abdicate my inheritance rights in some roundabout way... Same as the last one.”

“I have told the doctor to pick an appropriate time to intrude, so the meeting should not last very long. I simply ask that you endure it for a short while.”

“...Yeah. Thanks.”

Auguste squatted down in front of the full-length mirror; this was a man’s room, so there wasn’t a dresser she could use. A young woman’s gentle face was hidden away beneath makeup. She needed to look haggard—eaten away by disease. Had the real Auguste been alive, he would be twenty-four by now. He had been so scrawny and sickly that he didn’t appear much of a man to begin with, but it was still a great deal of work preparing a young woman enough that she could pass as him. The girl was still only fourteen years of age, after all.

“How long...?”

How long must I live like this? Can I really keep it up forever? I suppose it’ll continue until my true identity is revealed, and I’m beheaded for deceiving the emperor.

“Is something the matter?” Lillim asked, cocking her head slightly as she brushed Auguste’s hair.

The prince did not respond; divulging her feelings here would only bring trouble to the maid who was putting in so much effort for her sake.

An expert arrived to further adjust Auguste’s makeup, and once it was agreed that she looked adequately unwell, she was promptly returned to her bed.

I guess I’ll read until this new commander arrives, she thought. She liked stories, especially the ones with princes and heroes, and she didn’t care if people laughed at how infantile that was. The young woman quite adored when the captive princess was saved by her prince.

✧ ✧ ✧

Baudouin would turn forty-five that year.

Serving as the head of a count house, he had conducted himself perfectly across his entire career thus far. He had never taken part in any dangerous operations, meaning he had carried out his duties in relative safety, and while he hadn't been recognized for any distinguished service, he was known to be reliable. Under the recommendation of not just his predecessor but General Latrielle himself, he was appointed as commander of the garrison that protected the capital.

He simply needed to endure this new position for another five—maybe ten—years without any grave errors, then he would be rewarded with land or money and could finally retire. *Know your own limits*—that was his personal creed. *That's the secret to a long and successful life*.

Owing to his nature, while he never neglected to gather information, he was largely uninterested in whatever went on beyond the walls of the capital. While the nobles gathered in the court salon frowned, Baudouin alone remained as upright and unmoving as a statue, even as a conspicuously sour-faced individual approached him.

"I didn't know you were here, Count."

"Her Majesty. A good day to you."

Try as she may to cover it up with gaudy clothing and thick makeup, the empress consort could never conceal her intimidating air; she emitted the threatening aura of a large, carnivorous beast. Baudouin wasn't particularly skilled, but he was still a man of the military, and even he could feel a shiver run down his spine in her presence.

The empress consort opened her folding fan, placing it over her lips. "It isn't a good day at all."

"My apol—"

"Everyone here speaks of nothing but the little girl whom I drove out. Why must they speak of such filthy matters, I wonder? Is that not a blemish on the dignity of the court?"

"Certainly."

A minstrel the empress consort had called to the palace instead sung in praise

of Marie Quatre, the fourth princess. In a rage, the empress consort had the man exiled and drove the girl from the court. That event had taken place during the fall of the previous year.

It was childish arrogance to be sure, and the fact that the court had become little more than the toy box of a temperamental schoolchild made the empress consort all the more terrifying. And, like toys, people like Baudouin could be mercilessly discarded, forced into obscurity if they so happened to incite her wrath.

Marie Quatre, however, seemed to be an exception. While she had quite certainly been discarded, she had apparently achieved impressive results on the border. Nobody in their right mind had believed that a fourteen-year-old girl would be able to influence the war, and it was because of this conviction that these nobles would scoff and amuse themselves with baseless speculations.

Baudouin personally cared little for tales that took place 100 lieue (444 km) away, but he was aware that he couldn't be quite so forthright about that.

"Please excuse my pertness," he began, "but these tales of the fourth princess are so distant and transient that they will have been forgotten by tomorrow. This is nothing that you should worry about, Your Highness; the voice of the Arrow-Sparrow Princess shall never reach La Branne."

Insulting a fellow royal like Marie Quatre was a potentially dangerous move, but Baudouin opted to take the risk hoping it would improve the empress consort's mood—not that he could tell whether it had worked, since her expression remained mostly hidden behind her fan.

But then, the empress consort silently clicked it shut. She brought her right hand up to cover her mouth, using her fan to gesture toward the back room.

Baudouin responded with a nod. *I presume she wants me to follow her there.*

Fan signals were occasionally used by young noble lasses as a way of discreetly conversing with men they were interested in, keeping such interactions hidden from their watchful chaperones. They could also be secret codes for when a missus needed to pass a message to an adulterous lover. A talk with the empress consort, however, contained nothing quite so saucy.

Their conversation was moved to the neighboring room—an enclosed space not reached by the sun. It was akin to the cage of a vicious monster, and when the empress consort spoke, Baudouin couldn't help but wonder whether this was how a poisonous serpent with vocal cords would sound.

"When will that man die?" she asked him.

The empress consort wanted her son Prince Latrielle enthroned so desperately that she didn't know what to do with herself. She had the support of a great many prominent nobles, but the Crown Prince refused to give up his birthright, despite being unfit for public office.

If Auguste were enthroned, Latrielle would forever lose his succession rights, and while the emperor accepted most of the second prince's proposals on other matters—albeit sometimes reluctantly—he had yet to make a formal decision regarding an heir. It was too dangerous to press him for a decision while his thoughts on the matter remained unknown, and so the simplest solution was to have Auguste succumb to an illness—even one that hadn't been bestowed upon him by God above.

"...Ever since that incident, the Crown Prince has shut himself away in his villa," Baudouin said. "His meals are prepared by a personal chef."

Auguste's illness was one of the stomach, so he needed specially-prepared food that was easy to digest—or at least, that was the excuse they had gone with. In addition to this, his allocated maids were all from the second consort's personal territory.

The empress consort wore a cold expression. "If money can sway them, I will spare no expense."

"No... They are all closely connected to her house, I am afraid. There is no easy way about this. One wrong move, and our plans will come to light."

Were Auguste's death to be revealed as a deliberate murder, it would be considered the assassination of a member of the royal family—a crime that carried the death penalty, even for the *loup gris* of an empress consort who had swallowed the court whole.

"Then make it so he is killed by bandits."

“Y-You don’t mean...” Baudouin felt as though his very heart had stopped. It certainly wasn’t an impossible demand—after all, he was the one tasked with managing the palace’s security. “Please be merciful...” he said weakly. “However would I escape the blame for that...?”

He struggled to comprehend the empress consort’s request. Yes, it was her influence that had gotten him Latrielle’s backing in the first place, but that wasn’t nearly enough to compensate for him essentially taking the blame for Auguste’s assassination.

The empress consort opened her fan, using it to hide her face once more. Baudouin was the only other person in the room, so this must have simply been a habit she had developed for whenever a scheme breached her lips.

“Indeed, someone might protest in the case of negligent security... But what if the security was so strict—so all-encompassing—that not even someone playing devil’s advocate could complain? Would you not get away with little more than a change of station? I’ll personally ensure that any punishments are minimal.”

“I... see... Security so strict that it’s beyond criticism...”

Even that wasn’t absolute, but with the protection of a high noble, there was a high chance that he would get off with just a demotion—especially when Latrielle had such a firm grasp on the military.

“Count Baudouin,” the serpent whispered from behind her fan, “you need only clear your name by quelling some civil unrest and you shall be welcomed back to the capital. Sure, they may call you the commander of the garrison now, but you’re no more than a watchdog... What you really want is a seat in the court, correct?”

“Wh—?! Th-That’s...”

The court contained administrative bodies such as the Ministry of Ceremonies and the Ministry of Military Affairs. By securing an important position within any of them, Baudouin’s dream of one day becoming a marquis would actually become possible. He could already feel the sweat on his palms.

“But even if our security is airtight, there would be quite an uproar if

someone manages to infiltrate the palace grounds. This outrage wouldn't be contained to my garrison, either: many would demand an explanation from the commander of the First Army himself, General Latrielle."

"Find a way."

"I... Understood."

Baudouin couldn't help but wonder if even the serpent who had tempted the innocent children of God to sin was quite so vile.

"Do you not want to become a marquis, Count Baudouin?" the empress consort asked enticingly.

At those words, the count's entire body became increasingly clammy. He even felt a sudden pressure in his chest that made it hard to breathe.

"I... I know a man. He's a knight of great renown who does not possess enough skill to warrant his reputation. Although he leads a house whose previous heads have been known to match a thousand men each—a house hailed as *L'Empereur Flamme*'s right hand—he himself does not hold a single achievement on the battlefield."

By placing such a famed knight on Auguste's guard detail, perhaps Baudouin would be able to escape criticism. It could easily be said that their security was breached due to this man's incompetence, and the situation would be resolved before it became too great of a ruckus.

The empress consort's eyes narrowed, then her fan snapped shut. "Very well," she said. "Use him."

With that, Baudouin reverently lowered his head.

"I'll arrange for it at once, Your Highness."

✧ ✧ ✧

In the southwest quarter of the Belgarian Empire, a rebellion by Marquis Trosa had caused a civil war. He was a noble who had funds but no war assets, so it was thought that this turmoil would be quelled soon enough. But owing to the outstanding mercenaries the marquis had hired, and what could only be described as the incompetence of the Sixth Army's commander, the war had

turned to a stalemate.

The conflict that was supposed to have ended in just half a month had now drawn on for half a year, and the men who had assumed they would be home by fall were now forced to watch the year end on the battlefield. Troop morale was at an all-time low. The half-hearted soldiers amused themselves drinking and gambling in broad daylight, with even the residence seized as a command room reeking of alcohol.

And through that very command room resounded an angry roar.

“Again?!”

“Y-Yes... Again, sir...”

The man screaming was a balding general—more specifically, the captain of the Sixth Army. And across from him, a scraggly-haired young man called Eddie scratched his head, a troubled look on his face. He was only nineteen and appeared a fair bit shabbier than the soldiers around him, wearing a mangled black mantle and grimy clothes. There was a cloth-wrapped sword hanging from his waist.



“Tell me, when are you going to accomplish *anything*?! Don’t you have even a shred of motivation?! Or are you just some lazy bum?!”

“That ain’t it, Chief. But... How should I phrase this...?”

“‘He’s from a house of esteemed swordsmen,’ they said. Well, to hell with that! Don’t you think you’re dragging their name through the dirt, not making a single military gain?! How many battles has it been now?!”

“Guess you’re right... I have to say, though—we’re invading a territory that doesn’t even have any forts, and we’ve got three times the men. I didn’t think we’d have this many battles in the first place...”

“Y-You wretch! Are you questioning my command?!”

“Hm? Not at all, sir. Wouldn’t dream of it.”

We’re quite a ways past that... Eddie wanted to add, though he kept that part to himself. He did have his criticisms of the man’s command, but there was no denying his own uselessness as well.

“Grr... You’re getting much too big for your boots!” the commander shouted. He was now red up to his scalp.

“I’m really not...”

“Inheriting a ducal house at your age... You must think you’re hot stuff. But in the military, I outrank you! I *won’t* accept your defiance!”

The commander was a viscount and a major general, while Eddie was a duke and a first-grade combat officer. There was no mistaking that the man held a superior military rank, but Eddie hadn’t said anything that was purposefully defiant, and he certainly didn’t have any mind to rebel.

This whole confrontation had stemmed from Eddie failing to wound a single enemy during their battle a few days prior—that was all there was to it. It wasn’t just that battle, though: Eddie’s forefathers were famous beyond belief, and while he himself was often praised for his brilliant swordsmanship, he had never cut down an enemy in his life.

“Is the treasured sword at your hip just a decoration?!” the commander continued to complain.

“This thing... Right. I wish it was just a decoration...”

His cloth-wrapped longsword was the *Défendre Sept*, a treasured blade bestowed upon the House of Balzac by the founding emperor as thanks for their aid in the wars that established the nation. It had been passed down to every succeeding head ever since.

Eddie sighed. “It’s pretty heavy, you know...”

“Oh, don’t tell me! You’re not in cahoots with the enemy now, are you?!”

“Hardly!”

There was a sudden knock on the door.

“Who is it?!” the commander yelled, screaming with all the force he’d been directing at the young duke.

The door swung open, and there stood a well-built military man, his splendid uniform housing a tightly-knit collage of medals and ornaments. He was not the sort of man who would usually come to a civil war out in the sticks, and there were four lightly armored guard knights around him.

“Please pardon me for interrupting when you’re so busy... I am Lieutenant General Baudouin of the capital garrison.”

“Th-*The* Lieutenant General Baudouin?!” The Sixth Army’s commander immediately paled, raising his arm in a frantic salute. “C-Come right in! Ghh... H-Hey, Sir Eddie. Make sure you watch your tongue.”

“Me? Sure...”

Had the commander’s brain taken an abrupt holiday? He had quite clearly been the one screaming at the top of his lungs. Eddie quickly decided that it was best not to dwell on the matter and instead met their new visitor with a dubious salute.

What’s a big shot from the capital garrison doing out here?

Baudouin faithfully returned the salute. “I presume you to be Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

So I'm the one he's after...?

Not only did this seem like a wasted effort, but it reeked to high heaven of trouble. Eddie was more than aware that he couldn't worm his way out of whatever this man wanted, though, so he responded with a simple nod.

Baudouin made his appeal in the tone of a gentleman. "As a man entrusted with the security of the capital, I have a favor to ask of you. Would you please lend us your strength?"

"Eh? You want *me*?"

"It pains my heart to remove a skilled duke from what is already such an arduous and drawn-out war front, but you are the only one who can protect the future of the Empire. Please, lend us your—!"

"No, wait, seriously! There's a lot I have to say about this. Like, er... Well, for starters, I'm not skilled at all."

"You've got that right!" the commander chimed in. Eddie had worked under him for half a year now, but this seemed to be the first time the two men were on the same wavelength about something. They even shared the same enthusiasm.

Baudouin, however, did not concede. "I have already received permission from the Ministry. Won't you at the very least hear the details?"

With that, he presented a formal directive from the Ministry of Military Affairs. This went beyond permission—it was a personnel transfer notice.

"Oh, that's right..." Baudouin continued, taking out another form. "The capital garrison and the First Army intend to send the Sixth Army three hundred elite horsemen as reinforcements. I know this isn't nearly enough to make up for the loss of your famed duke, but if you would please be understanding of our situation..."

No sooner had the lieutenant general stopped speaking than the commander's expression drastically changed. He rushed over to Eddie at a speed unlike anything he had ever exhibited before, delivering such a hearty pat to his shoulder that it actually hurt.

“Duke Eddie, my boy! Yes, it breaks my heart, but if your transfer is for the sake of the Empire, I will gladly offer up my valuable best man!” he announced, having changed his tune so abruptly that it was almost nonsensical. “Glory to the Empire!”

Ah, you want those horsemen that badly? Well... yeah, makes sense. They’ll do you a lot more good than a revered duke without an achievement to his name.

Eddie was aware just how useless he was, and so he had nothing to say against his commander’s decision. Baudouin, meanwhile, simply narrowed his eyes and offered a confirming nod.

And thus, within the day, Eddie was put on a shaking carriage headed for the capital.

✧ ✧ ✧

The emerald carriage was certainly special—in fact, one might say it was the epitome of a pleasant journey. Its seats were the most extravagant sofas, comparable to clouds in how soft they were, and the interior was so luxurious that Eddie’s biggest worry was staining the velvet.

Eddie’s curly black hair wasn’t maintained in the slightest, long and untamed to the point that it hung over his eyes. He wasn’t clad in armor either, wearing but a tattered mantle over a soot-black uniform. He was tall with broad shoulders and had quite the impressive physique, but there was a certain perpetual slovenliness to his face that made him look like quite the wimp.

Only Eddie, Baudouin, and one younger attendant were seated in the carriage; the lightly armored knights were escorting them from atop their horses. As they traveled, the young duke was given more information on his new assignment.

“You seriously want me to guard a prince?” he asked.

“Indeed.”

As a lieutenant general, there was no denying that Baudouin held the higher military rank. In terms of noble status, however, Eddie and Baudouin were a duke and a count, respectively, so the man’s courteous tone never so much as faltered.

“His Highness Prince Auguste has been beset by illness for many long years. I believe we must provide him as much peace and quiet as possible to ensure his speedy recovery, and to this end, I wish to limit his guards to a select few elites.”

“I’ve heard the rumors. He’s apparently in quite a rut.”

“Have you ever met him personally?”

“Not in the past six months...”

As someone of such high status, Eddie had interacted with the royal family before: they would meet a few times a year for ceremonies. But as he had been out on the battlefield for quite some time, he hadn’t seen Auguste since his collapse.

“But palace security, eh...? That’s a first for me...”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“No, I always look forward to new experiences. Just don’t know whether I’m right for the job...”

“It won’t be difficult, by any means. The First Army is stationed around the capital’s perimeter, and all the buildings surrounding the residence have security of their own. In all honesty, I doubt there will be much for you to do at all.”

Eddie cocked his head. “Then why d’you need me?”

“Wouldn’t the Crown Prince having an acquaintance by his side put him at greater ease than having some unknown soldier?”

“Right... Guess it would be pretty worrisome having too many strangers around. It’s already so tense and stuffy in the palace as is,” Eddie pointed out, only to be met with a wry smile from Baudouin.

Was that last part uncalled for?

“Not to mention,” Baudouin added, “nobody in Belgaria can match the House of Balzac when it comes to swordsmanship. Having the young head as his guard will surely put His Highness at ease.”

“Let’s hope so...” Eddie said with a sigh. “A pretty sword is all I’ve got going for me.”

The expression seemed to disappear from Baudouin’s face entirely, then he swiftly changed the topic of conversation. “There is one thing I have been curious about, Sir Eddie... Do dukes not usually manage their own armies, such that they never need to step into battle themselves? And if you have decided to work as a foot soldier, why are you not leading any troops?”

It was a natural enough question to ask. Eddie racked his brain, thinking how best to phrase his answer.

“Well, any soldiers I bring along with me could end up dead, don’t you think?”

“I suppose that is true...” Baudouin murmured, though his dubious gaze made it clear that he hadn’t quite understood what Eddie meant.

So he doesn’t get it either...

“I can’t stand blood,” Eddie said, trying his best to explain.

“That’s... definitely something...”

“I know this ain’t what a knight should say, but... we’re all better off not fighting at all.”

“Even when your house is famed for its swordsmanship?”

“Oh, I hate swords too—hate ’em second only to people dying. I mean, they’re tools meant for killing people. If possible, I wish they weren’t around at all.”

Baudouin’s eyes dropped to the cloth-covered longsword at Eddie’s hip. The young duke supposedly found swords detestable, yet he carried with him one of the finest blades around.

Eddie shrugged. “My pops went and vanished. Said there was someone out there he needed to beat, and shoved the sword and the house onto me. He’s on a journey to master the blade, apparently.”

“O-Oh. Is that so?”

Eddie could tell from the way Baudouin was behaving that he wasn’t going to

get much in the way of understanding from him. But that was fine. He was certainly used to it by now.

“The capital, eh...?” Eddie mumbled, rolling his shoulders. “It’s been half a year. Hope Gramps is doing well.”

“Sir Balthazar is in very good health.”

“Glad to hear it. Maybe I should get him a nice duck.”

After half a month in the carriage, on a sunny afternoon, the sublime townscape finally appeared.

✧ ✧ ✧

Baudouin stepped down from the carriage first, lowering his head. “My apologies, Sir Eddie. Our journey took longer than I had planned.”

“Not long enough to warrant an apology.”

They had expected to arrive early in the morning the day before, but by the time they reached Verseilles it was already dark out. Not wanting to wake anyone, they had spent the night at a nearby inn. This wasn’t too surprising of a development, though—they were traveling by horse-drawn carriage, so not everything could go exactly as planned.

For the first time in over half a year, Eddie set foot on the soil of the capital. Then, passing through the two-carriage-wide arch, he entered the palace grounds. This was merely the back gate for staff members, but it was still notably majestic in its appearance: there were exquisite carvings on the walls and pillars, while the floor was polished to a mirror sheen.

“I’ve never been in this way before,” Eddie said. “Didn’t know it looked like this.”

“Please pardon my haste, but we must hurry and meet with His Highness.”

“Sure.”

Eddie walked side by side with Baudouin, the two men accompanied by the count’s four knights and attendant.

The palace was the base of operations for various administrative bodies, as

well as home to the servants who tended to them. In order to accommodate them, this section of the palace contained numerous large-scale stoves and washing areas, with countless attendants always busy at work.

Baudouin frowned. “Please forgive me for this unsightly display.”

“No, I actually prefer it this way. It actually feels like someone lives here. Not to say I, uh, hate the front door, of course...”

Perhaps Eddie’s attempted reassurance had only made things worse. It wasn’t as though he was making excuses, though, and his intention wasn’t to criticize the nobility—he just couldn’t stand to be around it all. How did extravagant jewels and luxurious silk dresses help anyone to survive? To him, they were as fleeting and unnecessary as the leaves that stuck to a cat’s fur as it passed through a thicket.

In Eddie’s eyes, all that he needed was enough clothing to keep himself protected, enough food to not go hungry, and housing sturdy enough to survive the elements. His lofty title and the emperor’s sword were both unnecessary weights, so heavy that he simply wanted to toss them aside, but he couldn’t bring himself to do something so irresponsible. He had an obligation to fulfill his duties and to pick up where his predecessors had left off. In that sense, perhaps they were more shackles than weights.

“Mn...?”

He noticed several soldiers walking in their direction, traversing the passage as busy servants passed them by. That wasn’t rare in itself—the palace guard had a break room around here, and the First Army’s commanding officers frequented the palace as well—but Eddie could feel that this was something else.

“Something ain’t right...” he said under his breath.

It wasn’t that they were dressed strangely—in fact, their military uniforms were practically pristine—so he could only chalk it up to the atmosphere they exuded. These weren’t proper soldiers—not the prestigious sort who would normally pass through the palace.

Are they from the front lines, maybe? Eddie wondered, but then he quickly

shook his head. *No, they're more like mercenaries.*

Even when walking alongside their comrades, they seemed constantly on edge. This was the safest spot in the Empire, yet these men exchanged looks as though they were marching through enemy territory. Eddie had a feeling he was onto something: it really was like they were freshly hired mercenaries.

There were six men in total, and the one taking the lead stuck out the most. He had narrow eyes and thin lips; it was like someone had taken a knife and carved slits into a blank mask.

This guy's bad news.

Eddie knew it was pure intuition without reason, but he could feel a chill race down his spine. Had he been on the battlefield, he would have shouted for everyone around him to retreat without hesitation.

The narrow-eyed man stopped around three paces away, thumping his right fist against his chest in salute. The other men were a little behind, imitating salutes in form only.

"What are you doing here?" Baudouin asked, his expression bitter. "I'm certain that I instructed you not to leave the room. Especially not at this time of day."

"Got sick and tired of expensive wine," the narrow-eyed man answered. Then, he looked at Eddie. The moment their gazes met, the man's hand twitched toward his blade.

"...?!"

Eddie shifted his left foot back in turn. In his head, he was carrying out countless simulations of catching the enemy's attack with his own. Surely this man was doing the same.

Seemingly oblivious to this sudden moment of tension, Baudouin spat an irksome sigh. "If you are looking for ale, then you may ask the maids to accommodate you. I wouldn't want you seen returning to the palace after drinking that cheap swill they have outside."

"Fine. Gotcha," the slender-eyed man replied. "Looks like this won't be so

boring after all...”

And with that, he led the other soldiers away.

Only once the men were out of sight did Baudouin pull out a handkerchief and dab the sweat from his brow. Eddie understood the feeling—there was a cold sweat running down his back.

“My humblest apologies, Sir Duke,” said Baudouin, his bitter expression twisting into an equally bitter smile.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody you need to worry about.”

“That’s not the sort of soldier you keep in the palace. In fact, you can hardly even find them on the front lines.”

Baudouin looked mildly surprised at this remark, pausing for a moment before finally offering a response. “Please keep this between us, but... they’re former mercenaries. I hired them as soldiers on the recommendation of a certain noble. Their skills are the real deal, but they are completely unsuited to garrison work.”

“I would think so.”

“I’m in the middle of searching for a unit that will accept them.”

“I see...”

Even with this explanation, something wasn’t sitting right. But Eddie had no reason to outright conclude that Baudouin was being untruthful, and the man surely had his own circumstances. Thus, he decided not to pursue the matter any further.

✧ ✧ ✧

Eddie was led to the royal annex nicknamed the Volière—a cylindrical building much like a steeple. Soldiers patrolled the yard outside, but there was no sign of any security within.

Once he and Baudouin had announced their arrival, a childlike maid opened the door. She slowly led them up the staircase that curled along the tower’s

interior wall.

“The first floor houses the kitchen for Prince Auguste’s personal chef. There is also storage space for ingredients.”

“I see.”

They’re being careful because of all those poisoning rumors, Eddie thought, though he didn’t dare say it aloud.

“The second floor is where Auguste’s clothes and equipment are kept.”

“Equipment, you say?”

The door was shut, so Eddie couldn’t see what the maid was referring to exactly, but he assumed there was armor and plenty of swords inside. Auguste was too feeble to have ever stood in battle himself, but perhaps it was all simply for show.

“The third floor is where the maids are stationed. They can be promptly summoned to the fourth floor using a bell.”

“Sounds convenient.”

“Your room will be on the third floor as well, Sir Eddie. Though we also have a room in the main palace that you could use, if you would prefer that.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m a bodyguard, so I’d better stick close.”

“Very well. Should you need anything, please inform me or one of the other maids.”

“Thanks.”

The stairs to the fourth floor were locked behind a white door, so another maid circled around and opened it from the other side. This last staircase brought them to Auguste’s chamber, the walls of which sloped inward like an upside-down bowl. Thin lace curtains were draped around the canopied bed in the center of the room, in which lay a silver-haired man.

Eddie immediately noticed that something was off.

Hey, hasn’t Auguste shrunk a little? It’s only been, what, a year? Is it his sickness? The curtains, maybe? Or perhaps it’s because he’s lying down?

Auguste had always been rather small, but he had given off a slightly larger impression than the bedridden man before Eddie right now.

Baudouin reverently lowered his head. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. I am Lieutenant General Baudouin of the capital garrison. I have brought with me Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac, though I believe the two of you are already well acquainted.”

“Indeed, I know him well,” Auguste replied. His voice was strangely muddled, and his short utterance was immediately followed by a coughing fit.

Has the sickness affected his throat, too? That ain’t good.

The childlike maid spoke up. “You would do well to keep your distance; we can’t have you catching the prince’s illness as well.”

Baudouin nodded. “I can see that you are doing quite poorly, so I will keep our exchange brief. This may be to the detriment of my decorum, but I ask that you please excuse me. I believe that having a great many soldiers coming and going would disturb His Highness’s rest and recuperation, and for this reason, I have asked Duke Balzac—esteemed wielder of one of *L’Empereur Flamme*’s treasured swords—to personally handle security. The duke alone is more capable than a hundred men, after all.”

“I see... So that’s your decision,” Auguste said. “I graciously accept your offer.”

Eddie silently lowered his head, while Baudouin took out a letter from his breast pocket, placing it on the bedside table. “Please refer to this for the finer details. That is all for my report.”

“Very well.”

“Now, unless there is an issue, I shall take my leave.”

With that, Baudouin bowed deeply to the prince, then gave Eddie a courteous salutation. The maid accompanied him back down the same path they had come from.

Only Auguste and Eddie remained in the room.

“Sir Eddie... Please do speak to Lillim if you are ever in need of something.”

“Oh, is she the maid who just left?”

“That is correct.”

Eddie cocked his head. “What’s wrong? Your speech is unusually stiff. You used to just call me Eddie, no strings attached. Remember?”

Auguste simply blinked in surprise.

“You’re the one who told me to treat you as a friend when nobody was around,” Eddie continued. “But I guess we’re not kids anymore, so if you want us all to respect our stations, that’s your call to make.”

“I-I remember now.”

“Hah... Well, it *has* been a year and all. I did try to drop by when I heard that you weren’t doing so well, but the doctor said you weren’t in any state for visitors and sent me away.”

“I see... Sorry.”

“C’mon, no need to apologize. That ain’t like you at all. I was expecting you to say something like, ‘Then you should’ve beaten up the doctor and come in anyway.’ Not that I’m doing anything like that, of course.”

All of a sudden, Auguste went into another coughing fit.

“Ah! Are you okay?!”

“...Yes. Please, don’t worry.”

He’s got it pretty bad... Eddie thought, still concerned despite Auguste’s attempted reassurance. “I have to say, though... I was sure that you of all people would refuse to have me as your guard.”

“Whyever would you think that?”

“Why? I mean... you know I can’t even cut people, right?”

“Wha...?”

Eddie was taken aback by what sounded like the gasp of a young girl, after which Auguste immediately started to cough again. Something didn’t seem quite right about the timing, but as far as infectious diseases were concerned, the less he knew, the better.

“I actually went to the battlefield just recently. Still couldn’t do it, though. I remember you telling me that enemy soldiers are no different from wolves, but even then... I couldn’t raise my sword against them. I mean, if I did, they’d die. I hate it when people die.”

“...How considerate.”

“A coward running away from his responsibilities, as Latrielle put it.”

Beyond the curtain, Auguste swallowed his breath.

“What’s up?” Eddie asked dubiously.

“...Latrielle is the true coward.”

“Well, he’s certainly merciless, I can say that much.”

“He has his sights on me... I may be assassinated any day now.”

“Was it really an assassination attempt, that last incident?”

“...It was.”

That’s rough... Eddie thought. He had known Auguste and Latrielle from the days when they all happily played together as children, but the burdens they shouldered after all these years meant the brothers were now at each other’s throats.

“Do you still want to become emperor?”

“...No. But giving up my succession rights would put Latrielle on the throne, and that is the one thing I shall never permit,” Auguste replied. His voice had sunk to an uncanny degree, and a deep hatred seeped through his every word. It was times like these that taught Eddie just how much things had changed while he was away.

“Auguste...”

The maid who had shown Baudouin out chose that moment to return.

Lillim, was it?

“Duke Balzac. I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Oh, Eddie works just fine. Pleasure working with you.”

“A pleasure indeed. Allow me to show you to your room.”

“Got it. Well then, pardon me, Auguste.”

“...Farewell.”

Eddie was led to his room on the third floor. It was inconceivably narrow, especially for the head of a ducal house, but adequate enough given that his standing in the military was merely that of a first-grade combat officer.

The room was originally meant to be a guard station, but it had never seen any use due to a clash of opinions somewhere down the line. The second consort had apparently tried to bring guards from her own territory, but as the imperial army were meant to be entrusted with protecting the royal family, they considered this an inexcusable affront.

The ensuing argument ultimately resolved with the imperial troops patrolling only the annex’s perimeter, while no soldiers were stationed in the building itself.

Eddie was a special case—the second consort knew and trusted him. Or at least, she made it seem like she trusted him. Eddie wasn’t fully certain whether those were her true feelings or just a polite facade, since openly doubting his credibility would have been akin to calling the duke a potential assassin.

Incidentally, every prominent noble had their own standing army, which they would take command of after automatically being made a high official by the Ministry of Military Affairs. Eddie was the only duke who served in the military as a mere first-grade.

✧ ✧ ✧

Auguste’s life had changed quite a bit. For starters, she could no longer bathe as she wished. There was little that could be done about this, as she now lived with someone from whom she needed to hide the fact she was a girl.

She had seen Eddie a few times when she was young—back when she went by her own name and wasn’t posing as a man. She had watched him play with Auguste, Latrielle, and Bastian as though the three were brothers to him.

Unfortunately, as a girl, she was unable to join them in their games. The most

she could do was watch from afar. The case could have been made that her gender wasn't actually a limiting factor, since Princess Argentina often frolicked about with swords and rode horses with her brothers, but she was a strange exception. Most royal women were raised to be graceful.

And so she had never played with the others, only watched. But she had spoken to Eddie just once before. When he was alone, swinging his sword in the yard, she worked up the courage to talk to him.

She was eight at the time, while he was probably around thirteen. He had most likely forgotten all about their encounter by now.

"Do you like swords?" she had asked. "*I find them pretty scary."*

At the time, she had considered it a conversation. But in hindsight, she got the feeling that she was just interrupting his practice. By this point, she actively hoped that he'd forgotten. If nothing else, their standings had changed now.

I can't let him find out I'm a woman.

✧ ✧ ✧

The next day—

Eddie had decided to stop by the prince's room.

"Morning, Auguste."

"Do you need something...?"

"No, I'm bored. How about a card game? It's a perfect day to go outside, but I realize you aren't quite the sort for something like that."

"If you're so bored, why not go outside and play on your own?"

"Nice try. You won't catch me out that easily. The only reason you're saying that is so you can shout at me later for abandoning my post."

Come to think of it, that certainly is something he would have done... Auguste sighed as she recalled her late brother's personality.

"We can't play cards, though. If you get too close, you'll catch my illness."

“Oh, that’s nothing to worry about. I was talking to the maids, and they said they’ve all worked here for half a year now. No one’s quit yet, which goes to show that whatever you have can’t be infectious.”

The second consort had personally, thoroughly, and ardently trained every maid here, all to ensure they wouldn’t leak Auguste’s secret. If someone had asked whether the disease was contagious, they certainly would have given a sensible response, but it seemed that the maids loosened their guard when asked about themselves.

Auguste decided to change the topic.

“Very well, have it your way. I’ll concede to this card game of yours. What do I have to do?”

“I remember you were always pretty skilled when it came to poker. How about that?”

“No... No can do.”

Poker was a man’s game. It was a form of gambling. And as Auguste was now, she didn’t know the rules.

Eddie tilted his head quizzically. “Why not?”

“Urgh... Maybe seven-card rummy?”

“That ain’t a game for two. Should I call in a few maids to join us?”

“Ah, no...”

No matter how well-trained the maids were, something as drawn out as a card game would be a sure test of endurance. Perhaps someone’s tongue would slip. Lillim was the only one she could trust not to divulge any unnecessary information.

“Well, I suppose the maids *are* busy with their work...” Eddie murmured. “Ah! How about we play old maid?”

“Yes, that sounds perfect!” Auguste inadvertently exclaimed, quickly attempting to play it off with another coughing fit. Even she was surprised by her own reaction. *I don’t even like card games that much. Why am I this happy...?*

But after living the same day over and over again, bound to this bed as though she had been afflicted with some witch's curse, Eddie's proposal was a shining light in the darkness.

"Aight, I'll deal."

With that, Eddie expertly cut and shuffled the deck.

"You're quite good at this."

"Of course. You're the one who taught me."

"Hm?"

"Jeez, really? You'd always abuse your sickly constitution, crying about how ill you were so that you could skip out on studies and classes. Then you'd scurry off to practice card tricks or knife-throwing..."

A-Are you serious?! Auguste!

It was quite the frightening revelation.

Eddie dealt the cards, then placed one stack on Auguste's bedside table. Right beside a book.

"Mn? *The Blue Prince and the Thorn Princess*...? Sounds like a book for girls."

"Wh— Hold on!"

Another slip-up. She had left it out after finishing it the night before.

"Th-This is... Well..." Auguste began, stammering her way through an excuse. "Lillim, you see—"

"Lillim? Why would it be in here then?"

"T-To think she would forget a personal belonging in her master's room. What an outrageous maid she is. Such a child." In her head, Auguste offered an earnest apology to the capable maid.

But Eddie seemed to have accepted it.

"Well, it happens. Let's get started."

"Indeed."

Auguste reached a hand through the curtain. It had been an incredibly long

time since she had received anything without the maids acting as an intermediary. How could something so simple—so mundane—prove to be so exhilarating? She rifled through the cards like they were priceless treasures.

“These, and... these...”

Auguste and Eddie both picked out the pairs from their hands and placed them on the table. Auguste could see that she didn’t have the joker, which meant that Eddie did. He spread out his cards like a fan before holding them out to her, their faces directed toward the table.

“All yours!” Eddie announced.

“All right.”

Auguste’s heart raced as she pilfered a card from her opponent. The two of spades. She could pair it with the two of clubs in her hand, so onto the table they went. With that done, she once again stuck her two hands out from behind the curtain, spreading her cards so that Eddie could take his pick.

“Your move,” she said.

“Hm... In that case... this looks like a safe bet.”

“Have it your way.”

Playing the game with only two people meant that every pick would make a pair—that is, so long as they didn’t take the joker.

It was Auguste’s turn again, and when Eddie spread his cards out, she noticed there was one in particular that he was keeping especially hidden.

The point of the game is to make your opponent take the joker, so surely he wouldn’t put it somewhere I’m less likely to see it, Auguste thought, reaching for the card with a resolved “Mhm.”

“Hahaha!” Eddie roared with laughter. “Who falls for a simple trick like that?!”

“Wh—?! Inconceivable!”

It was, of course, the joker.

Gah, he got me. This is terrible. It’s not even like I can use the same move on

him. He'll see right through it.

Auguste wasn't stupid enough to try and trick Eddie with his own technique.

Soon enough, her mind was working through strategy after strategy, so much so that she had become completely immersed in the game. They continued playing old maid until noon, after which she taught Eddie how to play rummy and watched him perform a few card tricks.

When it was time for dinner, Eddie returned to his room.

The day had passed like a dream, but Lillim made sure to caution Auguste as she ate. "Err... Prince Auguste... I heard you crying out and giggling like a girl. Are you quite all right?"

It was only then that Auguste realized her mistake, the shock and fear rendering her bedridden for real this time.

But still... it had been an enjoyable day.

✧ ✧ ✧

"I'm so screwed. This is the worst. It's the one thing that I—"

Eddie was facing quite the predicament. It was now a week since he had started guarding Auguste, and he was confronted with a problem so important that it put the House of Balzac's continued existence at risk.

I'm actually starting to find Auguste cute!

While they were enjoying their games together, the prince had somehow managed to grasp Eddie's heart and refused to let go. Everything about him was near infatuating: the heartwarming smile he made when he won, his irresistible scowl when he lost... But what was even more unforgettable was the excitement in his eyes as he looked forward to the next game, or the overjoyed expression he wore when they were about to play.

The situation was so bad that Eddie had seen Auguste in his dreams three nights in a row.

"I can't believe this... He's a guy! He's older than me! He's *royalty*! Why is he so damn cute?!"

Auguste was twenty-four, five years Eddie's senior, but there was something about the way the prince acted that made him seem much younger. Perhaps Eddie was simply mistaken, though.

Either way, I need to keep my focus on women! the young duke told himself. As the head of his house, it was both his duty and his obligation to produce an heir.

Once Eddie had polished off the sautéed chicken he had been served for dinner, he went to do his daily sword practice. While he needed to stay in close proximity to Auguste as his guard, this training was something he couldn't do inside the annex, so he went and stood right outside the front door.

"Hnn! Grah!"

He swung incessantly, as if trying to swipe away his worldly thoughts. The sword in his hand was a regular weighted blade, since it would have been unbecoming for him to use the emperor's treasured sword for something as simple as basic practice.

As Eddie was working up a moderate sweat, he suddenly sensed a presence. A figure leaped out from the shadow of the building in the blink of an eye, thrusting a blade toward him.

"Haaah!"

"Knh?!"

Eddie avoided the sword at the very last moment, swinging his own to counter in tandem. While the training blade was dull, it could still do a considerable amount of damage.

"Yaaah!"

"Hngh!"

The weapon thrust out by his foe was drawn back in an instant to parry the slash, the unknown attacker then following up with a sudden kick. Eddie swung his leg out as well, pushing himself away when their feet collided to create some distance between them.

Stepping out from the dim twilight, the mysterious figure finally came into

view.

“Gramps!”

It was Eddie’s grandfather, Balthazar Basil de Balzac. His old, wrinkled face scrunched into a grin, and then he lunged forward with another battle cry.

“Hyaaah!”

“Wait, we’re still going?!”

“It’s been a week since you returned! A week! And you haven’t come to see me once, you foolish grandson!”

Contrary to his words, Balthazar sounded absolutely overjoyed. Eddie parried the next slash, locking blades with his opponent on the return stroke.

“I’m a bodyguard now! I can’t just leave my post!”

“Not even a letter, though?!”

“I ordered a duck to be sent to you!”

“Ah, I see! You know me all too well. So, how’s work treating you? Doing your job?”

“Ech... M-More or less!”

The two men exchanged more blows than words before finally backing away from one another again. It took Balthazar a while to collect his breath.

“Seems my age is catching up to me. To think that brief exchange would be enough to wear me out...”

“Normal people get winded after twenty strikes,” Eddie commented, though he personally didn’t seem exhausted in the slightest. “You look like you’re doing well, Gramps.”

“Yes, yes. To see you here, serving as a bodyguard to royalty... *Snff*...”

“Are you crying?!”

“After all that nonsense about not being able to cut people down, and your total lack of achievements on the battlefield, I was sure this was it for House Balzac... But now, in my final years, it’s one piece of good news after another.”

“Oh? Has something else happened, too?”

“Indeed. It involves Princess Argentina. Do you remember her?”

“’Course I do—I’d never seen anyone that strong before. But, well... I haven’t seen her since she came of age. Got no clue what she’s up to now.”

It was around the age of ten that nobles began preparing to enter high society. Women had much to learn, and they were apparently taught not to meet with men so casually. For this reason, Eddie had barely seen Argentina since she turned ten. It was as though she had disappeared by the time he even realized one of his usual playmates was a girl.

“After you left on that campaign, Princess Argentina was made the commander of Fort Sierck at Prince Latrielle’s suggestion.”

“Hah?”

Balthazar went into more detail, explaining everything that had happened at the distant border. “Isn’t that great news?” he concluded.

“Absolutely. It’s incredible.”

“Perhaps she’s found herself a good strategist.”

“It’s the part about beating Black Knight Jerome that surprises me most.”

“How about you try taking him on, too?”

“Don’t think I could beat either of them, to be honest.”

“Khh... Pathetic! All those techniques I bestowed upon you are going to waste!”

“Well, they’re meant for killing people. We’re all much better off without them, if you ask me.”

“Our ancestors honed those skills over the past eight hundred and fifty years!” Balthazar exclaimed. “Why, back in those—”

“Ah. This story always drags on. Could we skip it?” Eddie asked, raising a hand to stop his grandfather. They had gone through this same routine countless times before, to the point that even Balthazar had grown weary of repeating himself.

“You’re right. Well, no matter. You’re here fulfilling your duty. Princess Argentina is doing well for herself... I’m happy. We’re all happy. I’ll have no regrets when heaven calls for me. In fact, I’d much rather they call me soon before this all takes a turn for the worse.”

“Why are you assuming it’s gonna get worse?”

“Well, I expect you’ll get sacked eventually. It happens.”

“Hey now...”

Balthazar grinned. “Or maybe... Hm... How about you promise me some great-grandchildren? Do that and I’ll live to a hundred, or however long it takes.”

“Ah, ngh... Yes, well... Eventually...”

It was quite normal for a man Eddie’s age to have a wife: among the Belgarian nobility, the early birds married at fifteen, and the late bloomers at twenty. It wouldn’t have even been unusual for him to have had two or three children by now.

“You were away from the capital for half a year. You could have at least come back with a wife!”

“I was fighting! In a war! But I’ll... I’ll marry! And have kids! Someday!”

Of course he would. Without a wife and children, the House of Balzac would cease to exist. Eddie didn’t have any siblings, after all.

His plan was to have kids, then teach them how to fight with swords. How they used that knowledge would be up to them. At the very least, he wanted to honor the will of his father, his grandfather, and his ancestors who came before them—to nurture a loving household, as they had done for him.

That was Eddie’s intention, but there was one huge problem: the very mention of marriage and children brought one face to mind, and that face belonged to Auguste.

“Urgh...”

“What’s wrong? Not having illicit thoughts, are you? You can’t go after a married woman. Oh, but don’t worry about status—if you fall in love with a

commoner, marry her. Doesn't bother me."

"You sure are jumping to conclusions. It's nothing like that."

But in truth, Eddie *was* having illicit thoughts. There was a reason Balthazar had managed to survive to such an old age: his intuition was spot on.

"Gramps... I'll marry someone who can have kids. Just you wait."

"Eh? What are you getting at here?"

Eddie held his aching head, when all of a sudden, Balthazar's expression firmed up. "Incidentally, O grandson of mine..."

"What's up, Gramps?"

"Have you ever heard of *Le Dragon du Fer*?"

"I've heard they're master mercenaries," Eddie replied, though his six months spent on the front lines of a civil war meant he wasn't too knowledgeable about current events.

"They're skilled, to be sure," Balthazar explained, "but I've heard they also take up kidnapping and assassination jobs. Tales of their valor come hand in hand with some very dark rumors."

"Well, they're mercs 'n all. I'm sure there's a lot they'd do for the right amount."

"They're here."

"Here?"

"In the capital."

"Doing what? Who hired them?"

"I don't know. But the information comes from a trustworthy source, and nothing can really be done about it right now. Nobody's breaking any laws simply by hiring them."

"But... this is the capital, ain't it?"

"Be on your toes."

"I shouldn't have a problem guarding the prince. I doubt he's gonna be

attacked by mercenaries in the middle of the palace.”

“The possibility of that happening is exactly why I’m telling you this. If this were the sort of danger you could foresee and avoid yourself, then I wouldn’t be bringing it up.”

“Guess you’re right...”

The fact that his grandfather found it necessary to bring up these mercenaries likely meant that he thought there was a high chance Eddie would encounter them.

“Gramps... D’you know their captain’s name?”

“Last I heard, it was Damien. Be extra careful. There’s a rumor that everyone in *Le Dragon du Fer* slathers their swords in poison.”

“Poison, eh...? They sound more like vipers than dragons.”

And with that thought, Eddie recalled the narrow-eyed man he’d met a few days prior.

✧ ✧ ✧

“No, Eddie... You can’t... Not there.”

“Shh, it’s fine. See? I just need to... H-Huh?”

“Is it... Is it stuck?”

“I just need to take it slow. Trust me, it’ll slide right through...”

“You’re being too forceful.”

“Quiet down. How about I move it around a little, like this? Think that’ll do it?”

“Ah... Eddie, no... It... It’s going to—!”

The wooden blocks clattered to the table.

“Man...”

“You’re always going for the risky blocks, when you easily could have taken a safer one.”

Today’s game involved a tower of colored wooden blocks, with players taking

turns to pull out pieces until it eventually collapsed. There were a few other rules too, of course, such as each player only being able to use one finger.

“I thought it was free, y’know.”

“I told you to go for the blue one. What a shame...”

“But you won. It collapsed on my turn. Isn’t that, er... how you play the game?”

“I know, I know... But it’s more fun to keep it going as long as we can.”

“I see,” Eddie replied with a chuckle as he industriously retrieved the fallen pieces. Two weeks had passed since he was first stationed in Auguste’s annex.

✧ ✧ ✧

“Eddie, what I’m about to say is important,” Auguste said, fixing him with a serious look. “You would do well to remember it.”

“What is it?” the young duke asked, straightening his back.

“A certain merchant is stopping by tonight.”

“Oh? Are you doing some shopping?”

“You can always put in an order if you need anything... But in this case, an art dealer from one of the provinces recently managed to do business in the capital. He wants to send a gift to the royal family as a token of gratitude.”

“I see.”

If the man presented something rare and wonderful, word would spread through high society in an instant. Anything considered good enough for the royal family immediately became more desirable among the nobility as a whole, and as an art dealer’s target market was of course nobles, he would no doubt produce something of astounding quality to promote his name.

“So you’re telling me it’s time for my first job. Don’t you worry—I won’t let my guard down for a moment, even if we’re just dealing with an art dealer here.”

Eddie couldn’t read minds; it was impossible to know how much of a threat someone posed purely based on their vocation and outward appearance.

“That’s not what I’m worried about...”

“Then what can I do for you? I’m not much of an art appraiser, you know. The attic in our house is littered with paintings, but I couldn’t tell you a thing about them.”

“I’m not expecting an expert opinion, either. What I was going to say is that I must ensure my appearance is appropriate for his visit. Make sure you do *not* enter this room under any circumstances.”

“Your appearance?”

Auguste nodded, his cheeks flushing ever so slightly—yet another gesture that seemed to separate him from the prince Eddie had once known. As the young duke beheld this unexpected expression, a rather peculiar feeling washed over him.

“That’s... Yes, that’s right,” Auguste replied. “Listen well. Do not come in, no matter what.”

“I hear you loud and clear,” Eddie said with a nod. He began gathering up the wooden blocks, as well as the playing cards, the darts, the senet board, the chessboard... They had certainly played a lot of games. “Erm, should I call the maid...?”

“Please.”

He rang the bell and Lillim arrived in no time at all, a pot of warm water in her hands. “Prince Auguste, I have brought the— Wait, what’s all this?! You have a guest today?!”

“...Yes.”

Eddie chuckled. “We’ve been playing since morning, but I might’ve brought a bit too much with me.”

“If our guests see this room, rumors will surely spread that Prince Auguste’s disease has finally affected his mind, too!”

“Huh? Is it really that bad...?”

“To think the head of a ducal house is playing children’s games in His Highness’s room... Do you not have other, more important things to do?”

“You’ve got me there.”

She seems more like a home tutor than a maid... Eddie thought, offering a wry smile. Meanwhile, Auguste bashfully pressed his arms against his sides, making his shoulders look even narrower than usual.

Lillim poured the hot water into a larger vessel, while several other maids began showing up with more waterpots. “We shall take care of the cleanup,” she said. “Get in the bath, Prince.”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“Sir Eddie, to your room at once!”

“Gotcha, gotcha.” After bowing to the prince, Eddie made his way down the staircase, heading to his room on the floor below.

Several thoughts played on his mind as he walked. For one, Lillim was incredibly reliable despite her childlike appearance; she certainly didn’t seem like someone who would leave a personal belonging in her master’s room.

There was also something wrong with Auguste—he clearly wasn’t the same man he had once been. Back when Eddie first arrived, when they had yet to exchange more than a few brief sentences, he had chalked this up to the prince’s illness. But now...

Eddie wouldn’t hesitate to admit that his own intuition was terrible, but even he could tell that something was amiss. Auguste was hiding something—there was no doubt about it. He had simply changed too much.

Well... he has a secret. So what?

Auguste was Belgaria’s Crown Prince, and Eddie had accepted a mission to protect him. That was all there was to it. It didn’t matter that he had started to look strangely cute lately.

“I won’t give in, no matter what happens.”

Eddie soon reached the third floor. When he closed the stairwell door behind him, the footsteps of the maids transporting water grew distant.

“Phew...”

He felt anxious. Strangely anxious. Why did hearing that another man was about to take a bath make him so restless? He had met affable, attractive men in the past, but none had made him feel emotions like these.

“Looks like our house’s days are numbered, Gramps.”

Instead of returning to his room, Eddie gazed out the window. That was when he heard it—a loud shattering noise coming from upstairs, accompanied by a woman’s scream.

“What?!”

He moved without thinking. After tearing the cloth from his sword, he kicked open the door he’d just come through and bounded up the long, winding staircase.

“Auguste!”

When Eddie reached the final few steps, he could see straight into Auguste’s room. The prince was completely without clothes, a broken water pot and a profusely apologizing maid down by his feet—not Lillim, but another maid whom he’d either never met or simply didn’t remember. But that was the least of his concerns.

The duke froze, his eyes immediately drawn to Auguste’s body. He’d been sure that the man’s skin would be haggard from his ailment, but it appeared clear and healthy. His torso was so slender that it couldn’t have possibly belonged to a man, his slightly prominent chest only raising further suspicions. Then there was his small navel and rounded hips.

But above all else, the prince’s lower body lacked what should have been there. In fact, Eddie could see nothing but a light thicket.

“I’ll be damned...”

“E-Eddie...”

“Oh my Lord!” Lillim cried. She threw the empty water pot in her hands, managing to strike Eddie square in the head. It shattered on impact, but the duke remained exactly where he was, frozen in fear, his face pale.

“The prince... turned into a girl...” Eddie was so flustered that even he didn’t

quite know what he was saying.

After leaking a slight whimper, Auguste closed his eyes and collapsed, the strength having completely drained from his body.

“Auguste!”

Eddie threw down his sword and burst up the last few steps. He leaped over the handrail, reaching out to catch the falling man—or rather, the falling woman?

Her pale and soft-looking body was set to land on the shards of glass below, but Eddie dived across the floor, just barely managing to reach her in time. She was limp and powerless in his arms, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Eddie heaved a relieved sigh. When he glanced to his side, he spotted Lillim running over, the color having completely drained from her face.

“Ah, err... Nn...” the maid stammered.

“Looks like there are a few things you need to explain.”

Lillim fell silent for a moment, her eyes cast down. When she eventually raised her face again, her eyes were filled with resolve. “Thank you very kindly for saving Prince Auguste,” she said. “I will explain everything—I promise I will. But before that, please place the prince on his bed.”

“...Aight.”

Eddie supported Auguste’s slumped body from under the knees. She was light—so light that he wondered whether she really was a human just like him. He kept his eyes forward as he walked, taking care not to look at her skin, and moved his feet cautiously so that he wouldn’t trip. The ever-tactful maids opened the curtains around the bed and pulled back the covers.

The prince was carefully laid down on the sheets to rest. The maids would probably handle things from there.

Lillim brought a chair over to Eddie. “Are you sure you want to hear all this from me? Or perhaps...”

“No, I see what you mean. It really bothers me, but... I should wait until Auguste comes to. Right. When he wakes up, could you say something to him

for me? Tell him: ‘Eddie didn’t see a thing. But if there’s something you want to say, he’s all ears.’”

“Heavens. Are you saying that you do not mind acting as though you never saw anything?”

“Yes. Well, pretty much,” Eddie said, declining the chair that Lillim had offered him and turning back to the staircase. “It’s my own fault, really. I broke a promise because I mistook a maid’s scream for his. I defied the orders of an imperial prince. Why, I could be sent straight to the chopping block.”

“Perhaps... but you only did what was natural as His Highness’s bodyguard.”

“It’s out of my hands now. If the prince tells me to forget all about it, then I’ll do just that.”

“Are you not going to report this to Latrielle...?”

“I... Well, I am a soldier, yeah, but it ain’t like I was hired by him. Not like I was ordered to investigate Auguste’s body, either.”

“...Thank you.”

“For now, I should give you some space.”

“Ah, you’re bleeding...”

“Hm?”

Blood was streaming down the back of Eddie’s hand. He must have sliced it open on the fragmented water jug when he slid across the floor.

“It’ll heal up in no time,” he said nonchalantly.

“I’m not so sure about that... Here, let me treat you.”

“Ah, you sure? I’m all yours then, I guess.”

Eddie’s wound was disinfected and wrapped in bandages. Then, once he had retrieved the treasured sword he had thrown out into the corridor, he quietly returned to his room.

✧ ✧ ✧

It was nearly twilight when Auguste was awoken and informed that her guest

had arrived. Eddie was called to stand at the ready in one corner of the room.

The art dealer was a man whose gaudy attire, including a heavy-looking ring on each finger, made it painfully clear that he wanted everyone to know he had money. There were a number of metal necklaces dangling from his neck—so many that one had to wonder whether they were the wares he was actually here to tout. Jewel-covered earrings had stretched his earlobes so low that Eddie had already taken to calling him “Donkey” in his head.

Resting behind Donkey was a cloth-covered parcel—presumably a large piece of art—and the four servants tasked with carrying it. The man approached the bed where Auguste lay.

“Your gracious audience is the very reason I am here. It is the greatest honor of my life to have been granted such an extraordinary opportunity. Thinking back on it all, perhaps the forty years I spent toiling away were leading me to this very moment. I was once but a poor, unsuccessful street artist, yet the previous head of our firm so generously hired me as a servant, and—”

“Prince Auguste tires easily, so if you would please make this quick...” Lillim urged, causing the droning art dealer to frown. But he could hardly ignore her candid advice in the presence of royalty.

He cleared his throat.

“Please excuse my drawn-out salutations,” he said, evidently having considered his life story to be a greeting of some sort. “I am here on this most wonderful day to report that our firm has set up a storefront in the capital. If you go straight down Verseilles Boulevard from the palace gates, you will find it at the intersection with Jean-Garla. We have completely renewed the old building...”

“Um...”

“*Ahem*! If you ever wish to visit, please do let us know; we will put out a massive signboard so that you won’t miss it. To accompany this news, I wish to present a wonderful painting as a representation of our firm. A splendid piece that I guarantee will be a feast for His Highness’s weary eyes...”

The art dealer seemed to exude confidence. The previous emperors had

gathered the greatest art pieces from all over the world to exhibit without fanfare all over the palace, yet this man boasted about his artwork to a prince who had already grown up around extravagant works.

“Very well...” Auguste listlessly replied, her gaze more focused on Eddie in the corner. Something rather shocking had happened around noon that they still hadn’t spoken about. Perhaps they weren’t going to speak about it at all... It was an understatement to say that she was quite on edge.

Lillim tactfully whispered to Donkey. “Owing to his illness, the prince has been eating less and less, and his temperament has suffered as a result. You risk putting him in a bad mood if you keep him waiting for too long.”

“Mn... Is that so? In that case...”

The man’s servants briskly undid the ropes around the parcel he had brought, and, in a grand display, the art dealer theatrically whipped away the cloth.

“Look and be amazed!”

Auguste remained silent on the bed, while Eddie couldn’t see the art from where he was standing. The only notable reaction came from Lillim, who offered exaggerated words of surprise.

“Ah, how wonderful! Utterly amazing!” she exclaimed. “Wouldn’t you say so, Prince Auguste?! Ah, I knew it! The prince is thoroughly delighted.”

The art dealer seemed somewhat skeptical. “Is... Is that so?”

“Of course! I have served him for so long that I can easily pick up the reserved and elegant manner in which he shows his amazement!”

“Oh, I... I see. As expected of His Highness—he doesn’t wear his enthusiasm on his sleeve like your common rabble. So long as it pleases him, I couldn’t be...”

“You couldn’t be...?”

“Couldn’t be...?”

There was a peculiar moment of tension. Donkey was quite clearly waiting in anticipation of something—a request that he couldn’t vocalize. Lillim pondered the matter, while Auguste remained silent, her gaze still on Eddie. But the

young duke hadn't the knowledge to intrude on a transaction between an art dealer and royalty, nor did he particularly have the motivation; such a task wasn't his role here.

Finally, Lillim clapped her hands together in realization. "The papers have been requesting an interview lately, and I'm certain this splendid offering will make it into the article! Thank you!"

"My word! Is that true?! That's certainly a load off my mind. It is my pleasure, I assure you!"

"Allow me to show you the way out."

"Yes, I apologize for taking up so much of your time. Please display it somewhere it will stand out! It's an incredible piece that would cost as much as a noble's manor!"

"Indeed. We understand."

The moment their business with Auguste had concluded, Lillim showed Donkey and his servants to the door. The room grew quiet, and once more, only Eddie and the prince remained. Along with one massive painting.

"Get it out..." Auguste muttered, unmistakably speaking in the voice of a girl.

She would at times let out a high-pitched tone when she got too caught up in their games, but Eddie was surprised to learn that her normal voice was so calm and clear, like wind stroking the water's surface.

"You want me to move this thing? Not to your tastes?"

"It's a picture of war."

Eddie finally got a good look at the artwork. It displayed gallant knights mowing down barbarians and enemy soldiers.

"I see..."

While fine for a prince, it was not a painting to send to a lady. Lillim would most likely hang it somewhere frequented by guests but not Auguste herself.

"He said it's worth a pretty penny..." Eddie murmured.

"I don't care about the money."

That's fair enough, Eddie thought. He moved the art into a corner, facing the wall.

"Does that work for you?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'll be off. It's almost time for dinner and all."

"Hold on, Eddie."

"Yes, sir?"

"Sit."

He doubted she meant on the floor, and the only chair in the room was right beside the bed.

"Hm. Well, if you say so..."

He walked over, placing a hand on the backrest.

"No, not there."

"Ah, right. Sorry about that. You really did mean on the floor..."

"Over here."

The lace curtain was drawn back, and Eddie immediately swallowed his breath. Auguste's melancholic countenance was so beautiful that it sent a shiver down his spine. He wished that he could somehow frame it, preserving it forevermore.

Auguste patted a hand against the edge of the bed. "Right here."

"Me? You want me to sit... there?"

It was then that Eddie experienced nervousness for the very first time.

✧ ✧ ✧

Eddie took his seat, immediately feeling his body sink into the mattress. He had quite recently thought that Baudouin's carriage had seats like a cloud, but now he had to correct himself: those were merely well-made leather benches, and the *real* clouds had been here all along.

No sooner had Eddie sat down than the curtain around the bed was pulled

shut.

“Hey, Auguste... What’s this all about...?”

Her face was so close to his. A short while ago, when Eddie was sure that she was a man, he had been at a loss on how to describe these emotions. But now he knew. He found her charming. Her sunken, shadow-covered expression was irresistibly endearing. He had to hastily suppress the urge to reach out and touch it.

“Did you hear about what happened... half a year ago?” she asked, her voice gentle.

“Are you talking about when you... collapsed...?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?”

She softly bit down on her lip, and then—

“Auguste was murdered.”

“What?!”

With those words, Eddie finally understood everything. It was all so terribly simple, to the point that he couldn’t believe his own lack of insight. But then again, as far as he was aware, there had only been one silver-haired, crimson-eyed person in the world.

“Then who are you, exactly?” he asked.

“I’m... his younger sister, Felicia.”

“Huh?!”

“We’ve only spoken once before...”

“Have we?”

Eddie frantically scoured his memory, but he couldn’t seem to recall speaking to a girl with such notably unique features.

Auguste—or rather, Felicia—sighed. “Don’t worry if you can’t remember. It was only once, after all...”

A few tears started to well up in her eyes, and it was that very expression that helped Eddie connect the dots. “I see!” he suddenly exclaimed. “You’re that kid who hated swords!”

“Ah...” Felicia’s eyes opened wide.

“I remember! That was you! What you said to me was so shocking that my mind completely blanked, and I must’ve forgotten everything else.”

“Erk... S-Sorry...”

“You said that you were scared of people dying—that’s the reason you hated swords. That was it. What you said had never even occurred to me before, and that fact was what terrified me the most.”

“Eddie...”

“To be honest with you, I’d completely forgotten who it was that said it. The words had such an impact on me that they were the only things that remained. I did remember that it was a girl... and thanks to that, I’m a bit antsy around girls now... Oh, but I’m grateful.”

“Grateful...?”

“Yeah. There was always something playing on the back of my mind when I swung my sword about. Wouldn’t go away no matter how much I trained. But then I realized. I *finally* realized. I hate swords. I don’t wanna kill people. That’s why I decided to get so strong that I wouldn’t have to.”

At thirteen years of age, Eddie’s hesitation disappeared, and the way he handled his sword started to change beyond belief.

Felicia tilted her head. “Eh?”

“Hah, I’m not all that good at explaining it...” Eddie said, scratching his head. He was used to people failing to understand what he meant. She likely still shared his fear of people dying, but his assertion that this was the very reason he trained to improve his sword-fighting skills probably came off as contradictory.

“I don’t really understand, but... thank you for remembering me.”

“Auguste’s sister... Felicia... That’s kind of nostalgic. Well, maybe not that

much. I mean, we've been seeing each other every single day lately."

"No, it *is* nostalgic... It's been so long since the last time someone said my name. Finally... It finally feels like I've properly met you, Eddie."

"I guess so."

Felicia wiped the tears from her eyes. Her cheeks were moist from the crystal-clear droplets.

"The moment my brother died... I was brought out by Mother."

"I see. You were swapped out?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure that everyone and their uncle could tell *something* was off, but... the red eyes and natural silver hair are all you really need to convince them you're Auguste."

"It also helped that I'd stayed at the family home since I was ten. Plus, I never really stood out to begin with..."

"Well, a normal girl wouldn't stand out in that family."

"You remember Argentina though, don't you...?"

"Her? Yeah, well, I mean... She's special."

Eddie had heard the name from his grandfather just a few days prior. He broke into a cold sweat as he remembered their younger years. She had performed so many impressive deeds back then that the recent rumors of her beating the infamous Black Knight weren't all that hard to believe.

Felicia's eyes narrowed slightly. "Did you... like her?"

"Whaaa—?! Maybe you didn't see all the stuff she got up to, but Argentina was stronger than I was! In fact, for the longest time, I was sure she was a dude!"

"I-I see."

To be more precise, the last time he had seen the fourth princess was before he reached the age when he was conscious of who was male and who was female.

“She was stronger than Bastian when it came to brute strength, she could race a horse faster than Latrielle, and she picked up swordplay even faster than I did... It’s been quite a while since we saw one another, but last I heard, she’d won a duel against one of the Empire’s strongest war heroes.”

Felicia put a hand to her mouth. “Oh my...”

Eddie shrugged. “But rather than strength, I think I prefer cu... *cu*...”

“Pardon...?”

“So, uh, do all the maids know that you’re Felicia? Do the other servants?” he asked, trying to seamlessly change the subject. The young duke, who didn’t cower in the face of countless soldiers, couldn’t bring himself to utter just a single word.

“The cooks don’t, but my twelve maids do... Apart from them, only Mother, the butler, and the attendant serving as my body double know.”

That was certainly more people than he had expected.

“You can add me to that list, too. Oh, but, uh... the second consort’s actually pretty scary, so if you wouldn’t mind keeping this a secret from her...”

One wrong move and she might have him poisoned to keep Felicia’s secret. Eddie thought that both the second consort and the empress consort were terrifying individuals.

Felicia looked rather perplexed. “So you really won’t say a word...?”

“Hm?”

For a brief moment, Eddie thought she was referring to the literal word that he hadn’t been able to muster. But it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“You’re not going to tell Latrielle about me?” Felicia clarified.

“I’ve already mentioned this to Lillim, but no, I’m not going to tell him. I’m not one of his pawns.”

“...Okay. I trust you.”

“In fact, I was specifically ordered to protect Prince Auguste, and that’s what I promised to do. And if *you’re* the prince, Felicia, then... that means I’m going to

protect you.”

“...Thank you, Eddie.”

“You have my word. There’s one thing I want to know, though—what are you planning on doing from here on out?”

As Auguste, she was holed up in an annex, almost completely restricted to her bed. How long could she really carry on like that?

She tightly gripped the bedsheets. “Latrielle... killed my brother. I won’t let someone like him become emperor.”

“Makes sense.”

“And so... I’ll stay in this bed until His Majesty breathes his last breath.”

“I see...”

If the emperor were to die before naming his successor, then Auguste—who was first in line to the throne—would be crowned without exception. Once that happened, Latrielle would lose his chance in perpetuity.

There was of course still the problem of “Auguste” having heirs... but this was the second consort they were talking about. She would most likely take in the daughter of some noble whom she had influence over, falsify a pregnancy between her and the prince-turned-emperor, then take in a child from somewhere else.

“That’s pretty dramatic... And something tells me deceiving the people of the Empire is a major criminal offense.”

“If you’d rather slip away, now’s your chance. I’ll help you to resign.”

“C’mon, I literally *just* promised to protect you. How uncool would it be for me to say that and then back away?”

“Oh? Are you trying to show off?”

“Well, I *am* a man.”

“So am— Actually, no. For just this moment, I’m a girl, I think. Eddie?”

“Eh? R-Right.”

The way she was staring at him with bleary eyes made his heart violently hammer in his chest. His body was stiff, and sweat covered his skin.

Felicia allowed herself to drop back onto the bed and closed her eyes. Her pale lips let out short and fast breaths, her blush having made it all the way to her nape.

Eddie gulped. Lillim or the other maids could enter the room at any moment, or perhaps his grandfather might pay another surprise visit. They were both such likely developments, and yet the world remained uncannily quiet.

The evening sun sank over the horizon, its warm red glow fading along with it. Only the light of the candle sconces illuminated Felicia's face.

Eddie placed his sword down beside the bed, then reached out a hand and tickled her forelocks with the tips of his fingers.

The lace curtain swayed. What a quiet night it was.

✧ ✧ ✧

Felicia—in Auguste's clothes—stopped spending every waking moment immersed in games. She called in ministers and merchants, and while she remained in bed, she began to show interest in official matters.

Latrielle ruled the military, leaving her to petition tax reductions from the feudal lords and mediate the disputes between nobles. The good word of the Crown Prince was enough to change things, even if only little by little.

Eddie stood at her bedside as her guard.

Felicia was still fourteen and rather estranged from law and politics. Lillim, however, was a source of surprisingly astute advice, able to offer an appropriate plan for most situations.

Such was the case today as well.

The minister of commerce left with reverent gratitude, having had the imperial household weigh in on a petty dispute in the provinces. Lillim, who had directed the prince from behind the bed, emerged with a tired look on her face.

"That sure was a hard one..." she said.

“Thank you for your hard work,” Felicia replied, expressing her gratitude. “You certainly did a good job.”

Eddie nodded along in agreement. “Yeah, you even managed to convince me. I get that they had a contract, but that interest rate was absurd. Having them pay in full in exchange for negotiating a new, fairer rate certainly feels like a good middle ground.”

“In this case, the real problem was figuring out what that fairer rate actually was.”

“I-I see,” Eddie muttered, scratching his hair. He had been carefully listening the whole time, but it seemed the true essence of the problem had still gone right over his head.

“Let’s leave it at that today,” Felicia said.

Her words brought a relieved smile to Lillim’s lips. “I think that is for the best. If you start putting in too much effort all of a sudden, people will certainly grow suspicious.”

“Yeah...”

“Ah, on another note—the painting that you received the other day made it into the morning paper.”

“I see...”

“It came from a widely renowned painter and was the last thing he created before his passing. The article focused more on the art firm that obtained it than anything either of us said about the matter, though.”

The reason for that was most likely a monetary transaction of some sort.

“From now on, I’d rather only meet with those who actually benefit the country,” Felicia said.

“Most definitely!” Lillim replied. “Oh, it’s almost time for supper! Please wait right where you are!”

“Eddie... After dinner...”

“Yeah, I know.”

Life had changed. Now, for as much as she worked during the day, Felicia would summon Eddie to her room in the evenings.

✧ ✧ ✧

“Come on, Eddie... Faster...”

“Cut me some slack here. I can barely see my hand in front of my face.”

“We can’t light the candles, or else Lillim will notice us. She’d definitely get mad...”

“Of course she would. A sickly prince shouldn’t be staying up this late.”

“I’m always having to sleep during the day, so I can barely sleep at night. And it’s so boring lying here by myself...”

“Well, that’s what I’m here for.”

“Precisely, so... faster, please.”

“S-Sure. Aight, how’s this?!”

Eddie flipped over one of the facedown cards laid out in a grid on the floor. Then, he flipped over another. Their numbers didn’t match.

“Pshh...”

“Another miss!”

A smug grin played on Felicia’s lips. “The card you were looking for is *actually* over here.”

“No way! It was literally right next to the one I picked!”

“And then there’s one pair here, and ooone... here.”

“I lose again! You’re way too good at concentration.”

“Fufu...”

In this game, the deck was laid out in a grid on the floor, with all the cards facedown. Players then took turns flipping cards over two at a time. If the two cards they chose had the same number, then they could keep them. If not, they were turned facedown again. This was a game of memory, and the player with the most pairs at the end was the winner.

In most cases, Felicia and Eddie would spend the time after dinner playing games, though there was the odd occasion where they would discuss the issues brought up earlier that day instead. When she played, Felicia seemed to regain a sudden youthfulness.

As he watched her, Eddie could feel a pleasant warmth in his chest. He would think back to that night and feel it was an incredible waste to have done nothing but pat her head. However, a part of him didn't want their current relationship to change. Felicia may have only been disguised as a prince, but there was still no denying that she herself was a princess. What's more, they each had their own houses to shoulder; they couldn't act thoughtlessly.

"A kiss wouldn't hurt, though..." Felicia muttered.

"Pardon?" Eddie was suddenly pulled from his momentary reverie.

"I said... maybe you'll win the next game."

"Oh, I see! You're on!"

That was strange. Must've misheard... Eddie thought as he gathered up the cards. He shuffled them, then laid them out in a grid again. "This is my chance for a comeback!"

Felicia silently flipped over two cards. They didn't match.

"...Eddie?"

"Quiet," he ordered, his voice sharp.

Felicia froze with shock on her face as Eddie pulled the cloth from the sword at his waist.

"I heard a scream..."

The door that the maids used suddenly flung open. It was strange for someone to enter without knocking first, but before they could question what was going on, Lillim sprinted into the room.

"Run!" she yelled.

And then she collapsed. There was a sword wound in her back.

"Ngh..."

Her small body trembled, blood trickling from her mouth.

“Lillim?!” Felicia cried. She hurried over and gripped the hand of the loyal, skilled young maid.

“Run... And please live.”

“Don’t die, Lillim! Please! I don’t want this!”

“Hurry... Felicia...”

Lillim’s breathing was erratic. Her eyes powerlessly closed, and the remaining traces of color faded from her face. This was the first time she had called the princess by her true name, but Felicia had never wanted it to happen like this.

“No... No... What do I do, Eddie?! What do I do?!”

“Stay calm. The palace has the best doctors, the best medicine, and the best facilities around. She’ll survive, but we’ll need to get her treated fast.”

“We... We need to get her to a doctor...”

“That’s right. So just give me a second.”

Eddie drew his sword. He took his stance at the servant door through which Lillim had entered, where six shadows now stood.

✧ ✧ ✧

The figures were dressed in black, with black cloth covering their mouths and faces. They carried with them green-slathered swords.

“Hssss...”

A low breath.

“I take it you’re *Le Dragon du Fer*,” Eddie said, pointing his blade at the intruders.

“Indeed...” replied the figure standing at the lead, a well-built man so large that the longsword in his hand looked more like a knife. He was certainly better suited for a larger weapon—a battle ax, perhaps—but it seemed speed was his priority here. That much made sense: with a poisoned weapon, he only needed to land a single scrape.

Based on their stances, the mercenaries were all exceptionally skilled. The room wasn't all that narrow, but it also wasn't wide enough to run about in.

Felicia cradled the wounded Lillim, placing her on the bed. The maid continued taking short, pained breaths.

"Would it be tasteless of me to ask what you're here for?" Eddie asked.

"Hm... Eddie Fabio de Balzac. They're calling you the Dull-Blade Duke, you know."

Eddie frowned. That was the nickname they'd used to tease him on the battlefield, initially started by his commander. He had earned the dishonorable moniker after failing to cut down a single enemy in combat.

"I'll say this now... In these circumstances, I can't hold back."

He could hear a child gasping for breath behind him; a girl praying that she would be saved.

"Out of the way, Duke!"

Only one man shouted, but three moved in to attack. From the front, the large man thrust his poisoned sword, while horizontal slashes came from both sides to block his escape. Eddie could deal with the middle assailant, but then he'd get cut on both sides. He could also turn to either of the flanking attackers, but then he'd get stabbed in the back. Even backing off wasn't an option, since the thrust would still reach him.

"A sword to kill, eh...?" he murmured. "I'll just smash through it!"

"Huh?!"

Eddie moved to counter. He had never intended to dodge, since Felicia was right behind him. She was their real target; they were here to assassinate Auguste.

First, he swung the emperor's sword into the blade on his left. A dry *snap* rang out, before the green-slathered edge broke into pieces.

"How?!" his foe cried out in shock.

It was a move only possible thanks to the sheer sturdiness of the legendary

blade, but Eddie was probably the only one who practiced it religiously—a technique created solely to break an enemy's weapon.

Eddie immediately brought back his sword, pushing the thrust aside and parrying the right slash in the same motion.

Défendre Sept, the seventh treasured sword, was made with comb-like notches along its spine, designed to catch an enemy's blade. Normal iron would have bent at the weakest point when put under such stress, but this blade was made out of a special metal called trystie that didn't warp or break. By twisting the emperor's sword, a simple lever principle would place an immense load on the flat of a caught blade and break it, though it took considerable strength to take on two weapons at the same time.

"Haaah!"

The sword of the attacker on the right shattered, but the large man who had thrust head-on managed to yank his blade away just in time. It had chipped, yes, but it still held firm at the base.

Green liquid scattered through the air as the tip of the broken sword spun toward the floor.

"Bastard!"

"You're stepping in too close, goddammit!"

Eddie shifted his center of gravity around a half step forward, holding the treasured sword right in the path of the large man's swinging hands. He had moved so quickly that his foe didn't even react; his fingers came down against the blade with an uncanny sound, scattering blood and flesh alike.

"Gaaaaaah?!"

The giant winced. Meanwhile, the men who had attacked from the sides pulled their knives and thrust without missing a beat.

"Hrah!"

"A-Are we still doing this?!"

Eddie swiftly launched a kick into the left man's knee. The attacker was no doubt well trained, but he couldn't move fast enough for Eddie to consider him

much of a threat. His kneecap shattered at the impact.

“Nngyah?!”

In that same breath, Eddie swung his sword, severing the right assailant’s outthrust arm at the wrist. With injuries like these, both men would need to retire as mercenaries.

Blood spilled over the floor.

The next two attackers that came at Eddie were of about the same skill level. He began by breaking their swords, and when one refused to give up, he sliced him across the leg. The other seemed to recognize just how outmatched he was and attempted to run, but...

“*Le Dragon du Fer* does *not* flee!”

The last assailant, who had been watching from behind the whole time, swung his sword. There was no doubt in Eddie’s mind that this was the man he’d met in the palace corridor. His mouth was covered, but he had the same menacing air about him—and the same narrow eyes like knife slits.

The man who had attempted to run was decapitated in a single swipe, blood erupting from his open throat like a fountain. The cards laid out along the floor were splattered with red, and Felicia raised a shriek from behind.

“Close your eyes!” Eddie called, his gaze not once moving from his foe. “It’ll all be over soon!”

Severing a head in one slash required an abnormal amount of strength and technique. Eddie’s instinct had been right: had he met this man on the battlefield, he undoubtedly would have fled without a second thought.

So this is the head merc...

“You’re... Damien, if my memory serves me.”

“A knowledgeable man you are, my duke.”

“I just know someone who likes to gossip.”

Damien’s narrow eyes shifted to Eddie’s hands. “That’s a nice weapon you’ve got there. I’d expect no less from one of *L’Empereur Flamme*’s famous swords.

I'd thought this job was gonna be boring, but it looks like I'll actually get a chance to enjoy myself."

"You think this is fun? That ain't normal."

"I could say the same to you, Duke... Would a normal person hone their skills to such a degree? We both trained to kill."

"Don't lump us together. I thought up a way to not have to kill people before I perfected my skills."

"If you're overwhelmingly stronger, you can send your foes packing with a broken weapon or some bruises. Is that it?"

Was it because he was also a skilled swordsman? Eddie had found someone who truly understood him in the strangest of places.

Damien took his stance. "With such technique, why stay silent as they mock you? Give them a hundred years, and any human will perish. And if you leave them be, they'll just continue to multiply. They're no different from cows and pigs."

"I'll take a life if that's the only way to survive, but otherwise, that ain't how it is with me. I'm not gonna do what I hate unless I have to."

"Interesting... I guess you can live like that when you're born a duke."

"I get that there are folks out there who became mercenaries out of poverty. But I'm not kind enough to just let them cut me."

"Poverty? How presumptuous of you, Sir Duke. I didn't become a mercenary for mere coin."

Eddie hadn't met anyone like this before. In fact, he hadn't really known any mercenaries at all.

Damien slowly, cautiously closed the distance. "I was born into a comital house, you see. I wanted for nothing. But I was bored. Uninterested. It was like I was living in a prison cell. Then, one day, it happened... I stabbed a servant. An accident. But in that moment, it felt like I was alive for the very first time."

"That's... You're crazier than me."

“You’ll understand when you kill someone. The longing you feel once you reap a soul is the only cure for life’s mediocrity.”

“How idiotic. I’d just think of them and regret it forever.”

“I’m used to not being understood.”

“What a coincidence... That’s why I’m protecting someone who gets me. No matter what.”

“Is this... affection? There was someone I held dear myself, once upon a time.”

“You’ve fallen in love before? Then you should understand just how precious life is.”

“Dear, dear... A young servant. The first I ever loved. And the first I ever killed.”

“Eck.”

This man’s sick, Eddie thought. He was at a complete loss for words. There was something fundamentally different about his opponent’s way of thinking.

“Now then, we’ve made a bit of a ruckus, so I imagine there’ll be others on the way,” Damien said with a grin. “I’ll pluck your lives and take my leave.”

“Not on my watch!”

“You’ve only ever known lukewarm battlefields, Duke. Do you really think you can wound me?”

With that, Damien launched the first attack.

“Haaah!”

“Graaah!”

Eddie moved his blade into the path of the oncoming sword. He only needed to catch it and twist, then he would be able to shatter it. But the moment before impact, Damien drew back his weapon. It changed course, now a slash aimed straight at the duke’s neck.

That much was expected though, and Eddie changed his stance accordingly. When he was up against just one sword, he was confident that he could block

it.

“On the defense again, are we?”

“That’s my job.”

“Hah!”

Another slash, this time from on high. It was aimed right at his guard.

What followed was a metallic *clang*. Eddie had caught Damien’s sword, the notches of the *Défendre Sept* biting into it.

“Got you!”

“Think again, Duke.”

The man had already let go of the weapon and drawn a knife from behind his waist. Eddie’s sword was still entangled, and the sudden lack of resistance threw him off balance such that he couldn’t muster a swift counterattack.

“Die!” Damien yelled, coming forward with a sharp thrust.

Right behind Eddie was the bed where Felicia and Lillim were, so simply dodging the attack wasn’t an option. But the knife was already closing in on his heart.

In an instant, Eddie used his free hand to grab the blade caught in his treasured sword. Then, with the two weapons still joined together in a cross, he lunged toward Damien.

There was the sickening sound of pierced flesh as the two swords plunged deep into the tips of the mercenary’s shoulders. The knife, meanwhile, grazed Eddie’s chest before deviating past his flank; he bled nonetheless.

“No hesitation...” Damien wheezed. “You read me like a book...”

“Some head of my house from generations ago thought up the technique, even giving it a pretentious name. I didn’t read your movements, nor did I think up the move.”

“...Kill me.”

“Hell no. I want you to tell me who your ringleader is.”

“The poison’s going to kill me anyway.”

“Th-That’s...”

“And you, too!”

The knife that had gone past the duke’s flank suddenly turned, encroaching on his torso.

There was no time to hesitate. Eddie released his grip on the two swords, practically collapsing to avoid the knife. Then, from his low position, he kicked up into his foe’s abdomen.

“Guh?!”

Damien was knocked off his feet, and the two swords clattered to the ground.

Eddie immediately picked up his regalia and stood. It didn’t take long for Damien to regain his footing as well, though he shambled as he returned to his feet. He let out a low laugh.

“Kukuh... I lost... I... lost...”

The wounds on his shoulders bled profusely, but his hand still clutched the knife. Eddie diligently kept his blade at the ready.

“Accept the loss and throw down your knife. I’m going to have you name your client in court.”

“Surely you already know...”

So it’s Baudouin... Eddie sighed, recalling their exchange.

“Unfortunately, I don’t feel like standing trial. Nor do I plan on leaving evidence...”

Damien brought a lit candle to a parcel on his back. Eddie squinted, and that was when he realized—

“That’s...?!”

Oil, perhaps? Did he plan to set the entire annex ablaze? If everything burned to the ground, there certainly wouldn’t be any evidence, but...

Damien’s lips curled into a grin. He truly was enjoying himself.

“This, my good duke... is black powder.”

Without hesitation, Eddie leaped onto the bed to shield Felicia and Lillim. The explosion wasn’t far behind him.

Damien’s body was blown apart, the blast taking all the injured mercenaries who had been writhing on the ground with him.

All of the glass in the room shattered, the canopy was blown off the bed, and gaping holes were opened in both the floor and ceiling. In its half-destroyed state, the annex called the Volière went up in flames.

✧ ✧ ✧

Another day—

Eddie arrived at a room in the palace, right on schedule.

“Pardon me.”

“...No need.”

The door opened, and there stood Felicia, perfectly dressed for her part. There was a smile on her resolute face.

“How are your injuries...?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

Only those who knew the circumstances were gathered, and they spoke at ease to one another. Also in attendance was Lillim. She had more or less recovered, still serving as Auguste’s maid and secretly as her staff officer.

“Prince Auguste, I shall be waiting for you outside.”

“...Understood.”

With a curtsey, Lillim swapped places with Eddie and stepped out into the hall. Her wound still ached, but the antidote had apparently been a success. He couldn’t have hoped for more.

“...It’s because we got you treated so quickly,” Felicia said. “Both you and Lillim.”

“Yeah. If we’d taken much longer, the poison might have proven fatal.”

As much as Eddie didn’t want to thank Damien, the explosion had done a spectacular job at waking the doctors. By the time he had come to, there were people running around, carrying him out of the burning building and examining him.

Dressed in her male attire, Felicia slowly came closer.

“You protected me...” she said.

“That’s my job.”

She was still Auguste to the world at large. On that night, thanks to Eddie’s protection, she had gotten off nearly unscathed and thus protected her identity.

“Watch this.”

She sat down, then slipped a pair of boots over her feet.

“What are those?”

“I spoke to Mother, and she had them specially made.”

They looked just like normal boots, though perhaps a little on the chunky side. Once she stood up with them on, it looked as though she had suddenly grown.

“What do you think?”

“How...? Ah, the soles are raised. I couldn’t even tell.”

“Right?” she said, smiling like she had won a board game.

Eddie once again took her in from head to toe. “That’s incredible. At that height, no one would even suspect you’re a girl.”

“I... never could muster the courage to stand in front of people. But I can’t keep that up forever.”

“Yeah.”

“But if you’re with me, Eddie, I think I’ll be all right,” Felicia said, giving him a hard stare. At her new height, her face was even closer, and now that they were holding back on the makeup used to make her look sickly, her features were all

the more beautiful too.

Eddie awkwardly averted his eyes. “*Ahem*... They never did say how long I was meant to serve as your guard.”

“Would you leave if they ordered you to...?”

“I’d resign, perhaps. And I’d hope—if possible—that my next job treated me just as well.”

Felicia chuckled, putting a hand to her mouth. “Just stay here, okay?”

“As your guard?”

“As whatever you want.”



“I... I see.”

Felicia had a sword dangling from her hip, though the metal fittings weren’t properly fastened. Eddie reached out to correct it.

“This... is supposed to go like this.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you really want to go out there? It’s a party, right? You’re going to meet loads of people.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You think so?”

“Yes, because you’re going to be there with me.”

Eddie couldn’t help but feel that was quite a big responsibility.

“I’ll warn you now, though,” he began. “I’m no good at dancing.”

“And I only know how to dance the girl part.”

“Sounds about right...”

“But we need to show that the Crown Prince is alive and well. I won’t let Latrielle have his way with Belgaria.”

After properly affixing Felicia’s blade, Eddie stood up beside her. “Got it.”

He had removed the cloth wrapping that he usually kept around his treasured sword. He wouldn’t cut people, but neither would he hesitate to fight for those he needed to protect.

There was a knock at the door, and Lillim called out from the other side.

“Prince Auguste... It’s time for the party.”

“Indeed.”

Felicia turned to the door.

“I am Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria, and I *will* become Liam XVI. Would you accompany me, Sir Eddie?”

“Certainly, my lord.

A Vow to the Morning Star

ALTINA
the Sword Princess

Bastian’s Story

Altina had an older brother named Bastian, the third prince, who boasted far more physical strength than he deserved. He had gone off to study in the neighboring kingdom of High Britannia.

Bastian personally didn’t want to be dragged into the nation’s power struggles, and those in the court didn’t want such an ill-mannered prince around the capital, so the arrangement worked out for both parties.

On April 15th, in the 42nd year of Stillart rule, High Britannia’s queen drew her final breath. She had named Princess Elizabeth as her successor—a young woman who was at the time Bastian’s schoolmate, having adopted the name “Elize” in an attempt to conceal her lineage.

Elize began her journey to the palace of Queenstower for her coronation, surrounded by knights. But owing to a surprise attack from her political rival, Princess Margaret, her guards were taken out, and she was thrust into quite the predicament.

It was none other than Bastian who had saved her. He had chased her carriage for no other reason than to have her read his handwritten story as she’d agreed to do, and he protected her simply because they were friends.

While Margaret’s faction advocated war with neighboring lands, Elize preached pacifism. Empathizing a little with her stance, Bastian promised to deliver her the rest of the way to the palace.

At the end of a trying journey, they ventured to Fort Greybridge, where they hoped to get assistance from Elize’s uncle. Unfortunately for them, the man had already flipped to the war faction.

Bastian plowed through many soldiers, recovering Elize from her uncle’s trap, but trouble soon came as he attempted to extract her from the fort. He ended up in a duel against Margaret’s retainer, Oswald Coulthard, trading a slash across his foe’s right wrist for a sword to the abdomen. This abrupt decision led

to both him and Elize plummeting into the river below.

While the two ultimately escaped with their lives, Bastian had failed to deliver Elize to the palace. He hadn’t been able to see her wishes through.

Margaret the war hawk was enthroned, and in no time at all, the High Britannian Royal Army marched to invade under Oswald’s command.

On April 23rd, High Britannia waged an all-out war against the Belgarian Empire.

Days at House Tiraso Laverde

The room they were allowing him to use was on the first floor, furnished with a modest bed, a small desk, and a chair. A noble's manor was expected to have many such guest rooms; the nobles who visited from far-off lands would always bring servants who needed somewhere of their own to sleep.

Bastian was still declaring himself the third son of a count. He was also an uninvited guest, so he knew to be grateful that they had even afforded him a room for servants.

Elize was at his bedside. She had been crying until just a moment ago, so her eyes were still puffy and red. Bastian couldn't see himself owing to the lack of any mirrors in the room, but he knew this was the case for him as well.

A maid in glasses by the name of Shia was standing by the open window. She was a young woman with pretty red hair, around the same age as Bastian and Elize. Outside was the yard, where the house's servants exchanged grim looks over the latest extra.

"It's war! A war has begun!"

"It's been a long time coming! We've declared war on Belgaria!"

"War..."

Shia was pale. A maid had barged in just moments ago and screamed, *"It's war! The men are raising a ruckus about it!"* then left without even closing the door. She was surely off to spread the word to the house's other occupants as well.

With both the door and window now open, a breeze rushed in and billowed the curtain.

Bastian sighed. "A war the day she got enthroned... They must've been planning this for a while."

"I was naive," Elize replied with a nod. "They've been establishing themselves

all this time, and I never even saw it coming.”

“Nothing you could’ve done about it.”

Elize had been in Applewood, out in the countryside without any prominent backers—it was simply inevitable that she couldn’t beat someone who lived in the palace with legions of supporters and had at her disposal such a proficient retainer.

Even so, the fact that they couldn’t stop the war weighed heavily on both Elize’s and Bastian’s hearts.

Shia closed the window, and the wind ceased. “U-Um... I’m sorry...” she stammered. “I opened it without permission.”

“No need to apologize,” Bastian replied. “If you hadn’t opened it, I would’ve asked you to.”

The maid seemed relieved to hear those words. While the Tiraso Laverde family had saved Bastian and graciously lent him a bed, from her perspective, he was still *the master’s guest*. Young servants had a weak standing in the current day and age; it wasn’t rare for them to be fired on the spot should they displease the lord of the house.

“Ah, I’ll close the door too,” she added, making her way over. But a shadow loomed in from the corridor before she could.

It was a woman with her hair in a tight bun, wearing an elegant dress that covered every inch of her body. She looked to be around twenty-five—relatively young—but the sharp glare with which she was regarding the maid made that hard to believe.

“What are you doing, Shia?”

“M-Madame...?!”

“It is unbecoming to leave a door open like this. I could hear you from the hallway.”

“My apologies!” Shia conceded, quickly lowering her head. Her colleague was actually the one to blame, but she dared not make such an excuse.

Bastian raised his hand. “Can I interject?”

“Oh my, if it isn’t our guest. What is it?” the woman asked. She spoke politely, but her gaze was notably harsh.

Even so, Bastian didn’t falter in the slightest. Had he been the sort of person to shrink back in the face of a stern-looking individual, he would have listened to his grandfather and the grand chamberlain slightly more often back when he lived at the palace in Belgaria.

“Real sorry about this, but I’m the one who asked her,” he explained. “I thought we could do with airing the place out.”

“Are you trying to cover for this young woman?”

“Just being honest. You saved my life, so I personally wouldn’t call myself a guest, but if the master told Shia to look after me, then it’s only natural that she would consider me one. Of course she’d open the door and window at my request. So in this case, it’s me you should be scolding.”

Not just Shia, but now even Elize was looking at him with a startled expression. There was a moment of silence before the woman’s eyes finally softened.

“On your way, Shia.”

“O-Of course, madame! If you’ll excuse me.”

With another bow, she hurried out of the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Bastian and Elize were now alone with the woman Shia had called “madame.” She pinched her skirt and bent her knees, giving a curtsey befitting a noble.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Marlborough, the wife of the master. You may call me Marl. My husband is unfortunately away on business, so with all due respect, you will have to make do with me.”

“Yes, well, I’m Hein— I mean, Bastian de Madelaine.”

His real name was of course Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria, but how could he possibly reveal that now? High Britannia and Belgaria were now at war, so proclaiming himself the prince of an enemy nation would see him handed over to the military at once. Simply saying that he was a noble already put him in

quite a precarious predicament.

Elize stood and gave a slight bow.



From the look of things, she had already met this woman before. Naturally, she introduced herself not as Elizabeth Victoria but as Elize Archibald, just as she had at school.

The new queen Margaret was out for her head. For all intents and purposes, Elize had already lost her chance at the throne, but Margaret wasn't the sort to act on logic. They couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

A faint smile crossed Lady Marl's lips. "No need to be so wary; I don't intend to treat you any worse. We do business with any and all sorts. If we were to take a political side, we would lose a great deal of profit and earn ourselves unneeded enemies."

"Looks like you've seen right through us..." Bastian murmured.

"I won't ask what I don't need to know. Just rest assured that you needn't worry."

"I've already placed my trust in the people of this house. Speaking of which, I never got to ask... Are you the one who saved me?"

"Yes, the cabman spotted you as I was returning from a trade deal. A kind doctor happened to be on board with us, so I had you treated."

Bastian nodded, then reverently lowered his head as best he could from the bed. "You saved me. Thank you."

He was surprised by his own sincerity. Once upon a time, he had been just a little haughty and egotistical, a part of him convinced that it was only natural for him to be served. Worst of all, this had been an unconscious belief, and his position as a prince had made it so that nobody dared address it.

Since then, Bastian had realized that he was powerless alone. His very being oozed gratitude at this display of compassion, and above all else, he was sincerely grateful that they had offered Elize a safe haven.

Marl's eyes narrowed. "I only did what was natural. Rather, I should be apologizing that this room is all I can offer you."

"What're you talking about? That ain't a problem. You're even giving us food," Bastian said. Steam still rose from the chicken stew that Shia had

brought in moments ago.

“Oh, you were in the middle of a meal? Please, eat, before it gets cold. The doctor said you’d heal faster on a full stomach.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Bastian scooped up a spoonful of stew and brought it to his mouth. The first flavor to strike him was the salt. Compared to Belgarian cuisine, it was a tad simplistic, but it was just what his fatigued body needed.

With some encouragement from Marl, Elize took a sip as well. “Delicious,” she commented.

“I’m glad it’s to your liking.”

Bastian put down his spoon. From his mountaineering experience, he knew it was best to eat little by little when on the brink of starvation; eating too quickly would send his digestive system into a state of shock.

“Did anyone drop by, looking for us?” he asked.

“Our home, Smiles Hill, is rather far from Greybridge. Even if someone were searching for you, it would be some time before they came this far.”

“Right.”

Marl then turned to Elize. “Now, about the ring you’re looking for. I’ve tasked someone with finding it, but it hasn’t been spotted around where we found you. I presume it’s somewhere in the river.”

Elize cast her eyes down. “I... I see. Thank you. Please don’t trouble yourself too much; it’s my fault for losing it in the first place.”

“Our folks on the case said that they’d keep looking. They’re a bit strange, but surprisingly reliable. I wouldn’t give up hope just yet.”

“All right...”

As optimistic as Elize wanted to be, they all knew that jewelry dropped into rivers wasn’t often found. Bastian could feel a throbbing pain, as though his chest wound were acting up.

In what was most likely an attempt to pep up the dispirited young woman,

Marl turned the conversation to the rare tea she had procured for that evening and the apple pie that was currently baking away in the oven. That was when something suddenly occurred to Bastian.

“Hey... since I’m Belgarian and all, is it really okay for me to be here?”

“Whatever could you mean?”

“I mean, our two nations are at war now, right? Won’t housing a Belgarian get you in trouble?”

While certain physical features were more common in one country than the other, it wouldn’t be easy to make out one’s nationality at a glance. His accent, however, was considerably easier to place.

Marl smiled. “Tiraso Laverde’s main branch is now a ducal house in Belgaria. The master’s mother is Belgarian, and our business prospers on both shores.”

“I remember now...”

According to Shia, House Tiraso Laverde had originally begun in a small country to the south. Fifty years ago, fearing that their assets might be seized during times of war, they had expanded into High Britannia. Now that Bastian thought about it, he was less concerned about himself and more concerned about what might happen to this house.

“I don’t wish to be overconfident, but we have been doing business here for quite some time. Few would consider us foreign nobles at this point.”

“I hope you’re right...”

“Though if there’s one thing that might worry me, it’s the eldest son of our main branch. We’re looking after him right now, but the boy is... how should I put it...?”

“If he’s from your main branch, does that mean he’s Belgarian too?”

“Yes. His name’s Roland. He came here to study politics—a clever boy whose heart is in the right place, but his sensibilities are somewhat... peculiar. He can be rather stubborn, which isn’t good for someone his age.”

Is she tryna say that he’s bigoted? Bastian wondered. Perhaps Elize was thinking something similar, as she suddenly looked anxious.

“He won’t object to Bastian being here, will he?”

“I doubt it. He didn’t seem to care when I told him three days ago. But now that war has broken out, I don’t know what he’ll say... I’ll tell him that our house has no qualms about you staying here, but... I apologize if he causes you any trouble.”

“I don’t care what he says about me. Have you met him yet, Elize?”

Bastian had been asleep for at least three days, so he had seen very few people since his arrival. His question caused Elize to tilt her head.

“So far, I’ve only traveled between here and the room they’ve lent me.”

“Really?”

“How about I introduce you over supper?” Marl proposed. “This is as good an opportunity as any.”

Elize nodded. “Please do. We really must say hello, at the very least.”

“Then it is decided. Until then, please just rest.”

With a slight bow, Marl made for the door. Her demeanor was considerably softer than the harsh impression she had initially given off.

“Before you go,” Bastian called out, “can you answer me something?”

“That depends on whether or not I know the answer.”

“When you scolded Shia for leaving the door open... I’m getting the feeling you were testing us.”

“Disciplining the maids is simply my job,” she replied with a profound smile. And with that, she exited the room.

“I don’t know what her deal is,” Bastian shrugged.

“She seems like a good person.”

“Probably trustworthy. If she were on Margaret’s side, we’d have been handed over to the military ages ago.”

“Right.”

But even then, Bastian knew to stay wary. Depending on how the war

developed, they might eventually become bargaining chips. He would need to stay on his toes in order to protect Elize.

“Is something the matter, Bastian...?” Elize asked, his determined stare having sent a rush of color to her cheeks.

“Oh, no, err... I wonder what sort of person this Roland guy is. He sounds like trouble.”

“I agree. At the very least, I hope he allows us to stay until your wound heals...”

“What wound? Oh, this little thing? It’s already— Oww!”

He tried swinging his arms about, only for sharp pangs to reverberate through his stomach and back. Elize looked at him tiredly.

“You really are a fool, you know. Even a wild beast has enough self-awareness to recognize when it’s on the verge of death. Now get some sleep. We wouldn’t want to prolong your recovery and bother them any longer than we have to.”

“Erk...”

Bastian had nothing to say in response.

“I... really do hope you get better soon,” Elize muttered, gripping the corner of the bedsheet.

✧ ✧ ✧

“This world is rotten to the core!”

The eyes of the class gathered as there was an abrupt *slam* on the desk. *Oh, just the usual,* they realized, all too quickly returning to their banter.

Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde continued to rant, paying them absolutely no mind. His curly blond hair was cut short, and he wore rounded glasses.

“Why must we allow a handful of those in power to monopolize all the wealth?!” Roland continued.

His debate opponent was a boy in his class whose hair had been set in place with oil and whose uniform could not have been worn any more perfectly.

“Nay!” the boy exclaimed, shaking his head. “You say that, but surely you

realize: the king and nobles obtain riches proportional to the massive contributions they make to the country. Are you saying the unlearned and irresponsible masses deserve the same reward?”

“I’m saying they deserve to be judged by the same standards! There are far too many who obtain their wealth unjustly, simply because they are nobles.”

“Sure, that sounds pleasant enough on paper, but if nobles and commoners are put on equal ground, who would make these judgments? I can see no viable solution, unless you suddenly have in your possession the scales of God.”

“We don’t need such a thing to establish a better system in the world.”

“Oh, really?”

“Just take away the nobles’ special privileges. Remove their universal right to tax and replace it with a mutually agreed upon lease contract. Get rid of their tax exemption, too. Make it so that even a commoner can trade freely. If nobles do indeed possess the inherent worth that you speak of, surely they will earn enough to live in the same luxury without any of these unfair advantages. Not that I understand who needs such extravagances in the first place!”

“That’s absurd! Why on earth would we do such a thing?!”

“Because this is what it will take to create an equal country.”

“Then who will defend our land? Our values? When an enemy attacks, it is the nobility who display their courage. They are special, and that is why they receive special treatment. I hear you’re from a house of merchants—perhaps that’s why you don’t understand. But my parents were knights, and their parents before them. I know the value of courage.”

“Then the army should be more centralized. If there’s so much worth in protecting one’s country, why are the commoners conscripted for chump change and placed closer to the enemy than the nobles?”

“Because the nobles serve as the commanders! No matter how many troops a unit has, they stand no chance of winning without a leader!”

“Many nobles become commanders purely because of their inherited status. They lack any proper expertise, and what does that lead to? Three hundred

years of unchanging wars. That's why commanders should instead be selected from among our most outstanding individuals—commoners included."

"Hah. I don't imagine that someone who can't even read could take up a position of command."

"A very good point. That's why, instead of giving nobles all those pointless luxuries, the country should invest in improving its literacy rate!"

Just as their debate grew heated, both boys received a harsh smack on the shoulder. They turned around to see their old professor fixing them with a stern glare, his beating stick in hand.

"If you don't plan to listen to my lesson, get out."

The other students were all properly seated. Roland hurried to his desk in a panic while the professor made for the lectern; he hadn't realized it was already time for class.

The professor cracked open a textbook. "Today, we will be reading from Piercy's *Art of Discourse*. *Ahem*. When presenting an argument, it is of the utmost importance that you state your points clearly. Take, for instance..."

The students remained in their seats, listening to the professor read from the book. He would occasionally deviate to explain where the text was inadequate, and in turn, the students would freely raise their own questions.

This lecturing format was common, often referred to as a "reading." There were also more free-form lessons known as "discussions," during which students would openly exchange opinions on a given subject. Each class had a large selection of mandatory reading material, and with books being expensive even for the children of nobles, not every student could afford them.

Paper and stationery had only just become widespread, and this shift had yet to leave its mark on the format of the classroom. Students would simply have to memorize any important points they came across in their studies, saving what little paper they had available for the thesis they were tasked with writing. This manuscript was often carried around in a student's bag along with their other necessary materials.

Roland focused hard on the lecture. He was quite a bit more zealous in his

studies than most of his classmates.

Once morning classes were over, he headed to the cafeteria, as he did every day. Despite Roland being both a Belgarian and a stubborn individual, his studious nature and reputation as a forward-thinking liberalist had earned him a fair bit of acceptance from his peers. Even as he ate, he thought over that morning's class—how the given interpretation was actually quite novel, how he didn't quite understand a particular explanation, or how the teacher must have interpreted something wrongly.

After his meal, he headed to the library to continue working on his thesis, then headed back to the classroom for his afternoon lessons.

This time, however, something felt... off. All eyes fell on him the moment he entered, then his classmates quickly averted their gazes without another word.

"What...?"

He walked between the lines of students to his seat, where he found that the latest newspaper extra had been so courteously placed atop his desk.

War on Belgaria!

Stillart Year 42, April 23rd

In the name of our new queen Margaret Stillart, a declaration of war has been issued against the Belgarian Empire. Admiral Oxford mobilized the Queen's Navy the very same day.

A preemptive strike with one of our 74-gun steam-powered Princess-classes allowed for the speedy capture of Ciennbourg. We have further reports that our Royal Army's First Division has made landfall.

The Empire's Second Army is currently stationed in the city, and we predict that an intense exchange will follow.

Roland glared at the newspaper, frozen solid. "It's finally happened..."

"Don't worry about it."

A close friend placed a hand on his shoulder, at which point the others he

normally shared lunch with began speaking up as well.

“The country does what it does. It has nothing to do with us.”

“This is precisely the kind of situation where we must act calmly and rationally.”

“Is your house all right?”

Another student, however, made his disgust more than clear. “Belgaria’s our enemy now!” he exclaimed. “Letting this guy continue to study here is tantamount to treason!”

An intense clash of opinions unfolded in the blink of an eye.

Roland grabbed his bag. “Thank you. I respect High Britannia and its people. I certainly don’t see you as enemies, but I recognize that some of your friends and acquaintances will most likely be marching to war. It is only natural that you would grow so emotional. I myself am worried about the relatives I’m staying with, so I’ll be excusing myself for the rest of the day.”

But as Roland tried to leave the classroom, the student he had been arguing with that morning—the boy with oil-covered hair—moved to block his path. He would always challenge every little thing that Roland said, and each time their conversation would devolve into a fiery debate.

“You...” the boy muttered, fixing him with a glare.

“Is something the matter?”

“I swear on the honor of the High Britannian nobility, I *will* protect your right to study. You’d better be back tomorrow.”

Roland was so taken aback that, for a moment, he was at a complete loss for words. “I was sure that you hated me...” he eventually mustered.

“I’m always cringing at your shallow, insolent opinions, yes. But the only way to learn is by remaining open to values that differ from your own, correct?”

“Looks like we do agree on something...”

“That much is just common sense.”

“Yeah. I can’t promise that I’ll return tomorrow, but I’ll be back as soon as I

know my house is safe. Make no mistake about that.”

The boy responded with a nod and stepped out of the doorway.

After one last glance around the classroom, Roland was gone.

While the school was only a little rowdier than usual, the town was in a complete uproar. Some paled at the mere mention of the invasion, while others drank in broad daylight and sang merry songs of war.

There were people on the corner of every street, scowling to one another as they exchanged hushed whispers. Were they the pacifists, perhaps? Or maybe the Belgarians. There were many Belgarians residing in High Britannia, both for work and study.

Fights started breaking out as well, and while the police arrived soon enough to break them up, public order was certainly on a rapid decline. It wasn’t until he had walked a short distance through town that Roland realized he had been strangling the newspaper in his fist.

“That’s... unfortunate.”

He was certain he had maintained his cool, but it seemed he was still considerably shaken. When he spread out the crumpled pages, the ink had bled from his own sweat. It was then that he noticed there were other entries apart from the article on the war. Among them, a notice.

Be on the lookout for Belgarian spies plotting national chaos.

The culprits were apparently a boy with brown hair and red eyes claiming to be the third son of a Belgarian count, and a short girl with blonde hair purporting to be a High Britannian student. The notice was very thorough, describing their facial features in excruciating detail.

“Given how vivid those descriptions are, they’ll be found in no time.”

War had apparently been declared yesterday on the 23rd, and the extra was printed today at noon, meaning the warrants were new.

“Around sixteen? Why, they’re the same age as me... Is Belgaria using

children as spies these days?”

Belgaria considered fifteen the age of adulthood, but that was very much an ancient custom. Most neighboring nations had since raised this to eighteen, while High Britannia had decided on seventeen. Having devoted himself to the local customs for such a long time now, Roland saw sixteen-year-olds as still students, still children.

“Hmph. The more I hear about it, the worse it gets...”

A sense of gloom hanging over him, he made the journey back to the manor where he was staying. It belonged to a branch of the Tiraso Laverde House, who mainly dealt with the import and sale of Belgaria-made textiles. Their goods ranged from bedding to clothes to accessories, and their catalog was rather expansive.

Since the Empire’s products were of a higher quality than goods produced locally in High Britannia, they were treated as luxury items. Now that the two nations were at war, however, there was no telling what would become of their business. They wouldn’t be able to import goods—at least not in the immediate future—and with their main branch having become nobles in the Empire, surely they would face their share of criticism.

There’s going to be a lot of trouble ahead, he thought.

✧ ✧ ✧

That evening—

Bastian was awoken from his slumber by a knock on the door. It slowly swung open, heralding the entrance of a lone girl, Elize.

“Mn? Is it suppertime already?” Bastian groaned.

“So you’re awake, I see. How are you feeling?”

“Bit of a fever, but hey, I was shot, stabbed, and dropped in a river. As far as I’m concerned, this is a sign that I’ve regained some of my stamina.”

“Does anything hurt?”

“Nah. There’s a banging in my head, and it feels like the ground’s shaking beneath me, but that’s about it.”

“I should probably pay respects on my own, then...”

“How come?”

“I mean, when you’re feeling like that...”

“The fever means I’m getting better, trust me. It’s not like I’m riding a horse on a campaign. I’ll be fine.”

“Normal people don’t call what you just described ‘fine.’”

“Ahaha. When did you come under the delusion that I was a normal person?” he shot back, trying to act cool. But Elize simply stared at him, somewhat fed up with his antics.

“That again? There is no power of darkness, nor are there light-wielding holy knights.”

“Oh, Elize! Get with the times! I’ve come up with something entirely new! For you see, ‘As I wandered the abyss of death, I came upon the memories of a life gone by. I see... So I’m the hero who fought the Lord of Hell! Those memories shall give me superhuman strength!’ ...How does that sound?”

“What made that hero so strong...?”

“Er, who knows? That happened in a past life.”

“So all the hard work was done in a past life, and the main character is simply reaping all the benefits? I do not have a very high impression of someone who can do that without feeling deeply ashamed.”

“Y-You think so...?”

“I personally want to support someone who works hard themselves, even if they come from nothing.”

“Hm. I get it. Training scenes can really get the blood pumping...” Bastian muttered to himself as he clambered out of bed. The sudden weight on his legs caused him to lurch forward a little. Perhaps it was his three days spent lying down, or the fever.

“Oh, here. Wear these,” Elize said, holding something out to him.

“You’re a lifesaver.”

His previous clothes had been torn up by bullets and sliced apart, not to mention smeared with blood. The ones being provided to him now were the sort often worn by High Britannian nobility.

As Bastian started removing his sleepwear, Elize hurriedly turned away. “P-Please don’t just strip out of nowhere!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Do you not find that embarrassing?”

“It’s my body. What’s there to be embarrassed about? Latrielle and Eddie are pretty much the same.”

“*I’m* the one who’s embarrassed here!”

“Hahah... You’re pretty strange.”

“M-Me?!”

“High Britannian clothes are... How should I put this? They’re pretty simple. Though that makes them easy to slip on.”

“Belgarian clothes simply have far too much ornamentation. I don’t understand the point of adding so much embroidery.”

“What matters most is that they’re sturdy. Now, let’s go grab some supper.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Bastian and Elize arrived at the dining room together.

High Britannia’s manors were quite rudimentary compared to the ones found in Belgaria, though they weren’t as extreme as those in Germania, where they fixated on simple practicality above all else.

There were paintings on the white walls, flowers in vases on the shelves, and velvet curtains draped in front of the windows. The table accessories were kept to a minimum, and their cutlery wasn’t made of gold or silver.

The room was lit using bright gas lamps. These were used a lot more sparingly

in Belgaria, only appearing in a portion of the imperial palace, though perhaps House Tiraso Laverde was merely a special exception here in High Britannia.

Food had already been set down on the table, at the head of which sat Marl.

“Good day,” she greeted Bastian. “How is your body holding up?”

“A lot better than when I fell into the river.”

“Is that so...?”

Elize took her seat first, as directed by a maid, then Bastian sat beside her. The tradition of seating the woman first was apparently founded in religious practices; even Bastian, who had absolutely no interest in his studies, had picked up that scrap of etiquette.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“No, we’re still waiting on one more,” Marl said. “Roland should be here soon.”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a young man entered the dining room. He was dressed in the same sort of High Britannian garb that Bastian was borrowing, but he wore it perfectly. His blond hair was cut short, and he wore rounded glasses.

The moment his eyes landed on Bastian, he stopped in place.

“Eh?”

Roland observed him closely.

“C-Can I help you?” Bastian stammered.

All of a sudden, Roland turned on his heel and sprinted out of the room. Not just Bastian and Elize, but even Marl was dumbfounded by his reaction. Just as they were wondering what could have happened, he returned, gasping for breath. He had the latest extra in his hands.

“Th-This!” he panted.

Bastian shrugged. “If you’re talking about the war declaration, we already know.”

“Calm down, Roland,” Marl said in a quiet but firm voice. “You’re in front of

guests.”

Roland slammed the extra down on the table with a *bang* and spread it open to reveal a particular entry. “These two are wanted criminals!”

“What about it?” Marl shot back.

This time, Bastian was taken by surprise. Elize was likewise shocked: she rose halfway out of her seat and then froze, her eyes opened wide.

Roland smacked a fist against the table, “This is dangerous, don’t you think?! If they find out we’re harboring *spies*, every person in this house will be hanged!”

“I’m sure these two have their reasons. I would never sell out a guest.”

“Even if you keep silent, Marlborough, one of the servants could anonymously inform the authorities!”

“Roland... are you saying there are servants in this mansion who wish to see me taken to the gallows?”

“Erk... No... I spoke out of turn.”

“If your aim here is simply to bring that article to my attention, then I can assure you I’ve already read it. But looking at our guests, can you truly say they are Belgarian spies?”

Roland turned his gaze to Bastian. What face was he supposed to make at a time like this? Elize returned a serious glare, though she herself was clearly very tense.

Bastian forced his lips into a composed smile and stood. “Hah... I don’t think any further discussion is needed. You can get hanged for sheltering us? If so, there’s no two ways about it. I’m leaving right away.”

“What are you saying, Bastian?!”

He could understand Elize’s frustration; she was probably worried about his injuries.

“They dragged us out of a river and nursed me back to health when I was on death’s door. Can’t really ask for more than that. We should be extremensely

thankful already.”

“Bastian...”

“Hm?”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘extremely’... Or maybe ‘immensely.’”

“I-I coined a new word, okay?! It means ‘a whole lot’! Can’t you see how awesome it is?!”

Elize sighed. “I don’t know what I was expecting... but you’re right—we certainly can’t trouble our benefactors.”

Marl shook her head, then looked at Bastian. “According to the doctor, it will be a month before your wound fully closes. Where do you intend on going when you can barely walk? Do you have anyone else to rely on?”

“...No.”

She straightened her back, undaunted. “As you are now, you will either collapse or get caught. In both cases, the fact that we allowed you to leave in the first place would make us the disgrace of our house. After all we have done for you, do you truly intend to besmirch my reputation?”

“Th-That wasn’t what I was trying to—”

“If you really must leave, I will not stop you. However, from an outsider’s perspective, it will appear as though I drove you out, will it not?”

“I see what you mean...” Bastian muttered. He hadn’t expected her to be so adamant about them staying.

Roland groaned, his expression deeply conflicted. “While it’s much too dangerous to harbor wanted fugitives, as Marlborough said, we have a certain prestige to uphold. Our reputation isn’t something we can just throw away, not as merchants. But in the million-to-one chance that this *does* come to light...”

“If you aren’t sure what to do, there’s no rush to make a decision,” Marl added. “The fact that you’ve even been mentioned in the newspaper is proof enough that the authorities have no leads. You mustn’t panic. First, why don’t we finish our supper?”

“Right... We should eat while we still have the chance,” Elize said.

Bastian took his seat once more, as did Roland—albeit after a little prompting. Marl recited from memory her gratitude to God, and then everyone offered a prayer of their own.

And so began the meal. For supper they were having boiled green beans, fried fish and potatoes, stewed mushrooms, and roast beef. As nearly everyone at the table was considered a minor, their glasses were filled with orange juice.

In High Britannia, each person would be given a large plate onto which all of the dishes had already been served. There was no self-serving necessary, nor was the meal divided into appetizer, side, and main entrée. The food itself was a tad on the salty side, though it was quite nicely complemented by a rich sauce made with eggs and butter.

The preparations seemed far simpler when compared to Belgarian cuisine, but this simplicity seemed to place further emphasis on the flavor of each ingredient. The roast beef in particular was a masterpiece—a sticky sheet of red sat below the perfectly crisp exterior, the taste of roasted meat blending perfectly with the scent of fresh blood.

The texture was firm, and yet each bite melted in the mouth. There was a dull pain in Bastian’s head whenever he chewed, but the flavor was exquisite enough that he forgot all about it. He was almost in a trance, such that his plate was empty before he knew it. The chef quickly prepared another one for him.

“Ah, this is seriously incredible!” Bastian exclaimed.

“You’ll get a stomachache if you eat too much,” Elize warned him.

“I know, I know...”

Marl gave a delighted smile. “With an appetite like that, it seems as though you’ll be better in no time.”

“You bet! And having food this good sure helps!”

“Oh, right.” Marl signaled to a butler waiting by the wall, who brought over a parcel wrapped in white cloth. Whatever it was, it was presented to Bastian.

“What’s this...?” he asked.

“Please, take it.”

“Hm?”

He curiously removed the cloth to reveal a book with an indigo-blue cover. There was no title on the front, and when he flipped through it, he found that the cream-colored pages were all blank.

“Ooh! This is...!”

“I heard from Shia that you are writing a story.”

“Yeah, that’s right! I’m the man who’ll one day write history’s greatest masterpiece!”

During the spring two years ago, Bastian had met a soldier who opened his eyes to the wonders of stories. The man had told him, *“If you ever do write a novel... perhaps I’ll be reading your masterpiece one day.”*

Ever since then, for some peculiar reason, Bastian had been confident that he could write. He would spend every moment of spare time he had sewing together his story.

“Err... I don’t mean to intrude,” Elize anxiously interjected, “but books aren’t cheap. I wouldn’t feel right about accepting this, especially considering how much you’ve already done for us.”

“It’s nothing to be concerned about. That book is simply a sample that the master received from one of our business partners; our house does not have much use for it.”

Bastian nodded. “If that’s true, then it must be fate that it found its way into my hands. This book was brought into this world, birthed to contain my future magnum opus...”

“It astounds me just how confident you are in your writing abilities...” Marl said, seemingly impressed.

“Oh, enough with the compliments. You’ll make me blush,” Bastian chuckled, while Elize sighed for the umpteenth time that day.

Roland cocked his head. “A magnum opus, you say? Are you going to write a thesis in that book? I think you’ll find manuscript paper more to your liking.”

The manuscript paper he referred to was regular paper with horizontal lines printed across it, but that alone made it quite a bit more expensive.

“Nay, what I shall write is a story!” Bastian dramatically proclaimed.

“Yes, well... you’re supposed to write that on manuscript paper too,” Elize murmured under her breath, but her words didn’t reach Bastian’s ears.

Given the young man’s stiff air and studious nature, Bastian was sure Roland would mock him, but he instead began to look rather pensive. He was an individual who put quite a bit of thought into most everything he did.

“So, tell me... What sort of story are you writing?” Roland asked.

“A thrilling, blood-chilling, monster-killing adventure!”

“R-Right... That’s, err... What was it again...? There was another one that went like that, right? What was it called...?”

“Pardon?”

“Have you heard about it? A prince wanders the barren earth until his little sister appears before him as a knight, and the two of them battle for the throne.”

“Oh, of course I know that one! Ah, but... How do I put this...? I don’t think I can write a protagonist who’s that smart.”

“What about the sister? Did you think nothing of the sister?!”

“Well, I don’t hate that sort of character, I guess. I’ve got a sister like that myself, but she’s a bit... different, shall we say? Yeah, a heroine who can lift cows above her head is right out.”

“I can’t say I understand what you mean, but what a heroine truly needs is love.”

“Love, eh?”

Elize and Marl both looked puzzled as they watched Bastian and Roland’s conversation suddenly grow heated. But the two boys knew that discussions about hobbies were a bizarre sight to those who didn’t share the interest.

“Ahem!” Roland cleared his throat. “Err... Bastian, was it? Come around to my

study later. I have something important to discuss with you.”

“Hm? Sure, whatever. I’m sick of sleeping all day.”

✧ ✧ ✧

After the meal, Bastian accompanied Roland to his study. As it turned out, the boy was not just a hardworking student but also a huge fan of adventure novels.

“In all honesty,” Roland began with a completely serious expression, “my biggest worry before I came here was not being able to read the new releases of the series I was following. I was sure that I wouldn’t be able to buy Belgarian fiction here in High Britannia... Do I seem like a crackpot to you?”

“Like hell you do. I felt exactly the same way. When I arrived though, I realized it wasn’t anywhere near as big of an issue as I’d thought.”

“Indeed, entertainment can span the seas. To think they would actually sell them here!”

“I know, right?! The releases are a month behind, sure, but they’ll stock them for you if you put in an order.”

“They’re three times as expensive, but I bought a copy of the High Britannian version as well. The illustrations are bigger in that version. Did you know?”

“Eh? You serious?!”

“These books... These stories... They’re what shaped my sense of justice, you know.”

“I get you. A protag really needs to be a hero who champions what’s right.”

“I’m assuming you’ve read Professor Andrew’s *Green Knight.*”

“Huh, maybe you really are a crackpot. Of course I have! Do you seriously think I’d give that one a miss?!”

“Do you remember *that* scene?”

“Hmph... ‘Curse you, Count! I’ll never let you have Antoine!’ *Shiiing!* He pulls out his blade. And then *bang*! The count’s a villain cruel enough to kidnap a woman, and his swordsmanship is unrivaled, but the hero challenges him

nonetheless. That's true courage right there."

"Yes! Justice that will never bend to violence!" Roland agreed with a deep nod before thrusting out his right hand. Bastian enthusiastically gripped it, and the two exchanged a firm handshake.

The two boys went on to talk about a number of other books, and as their discussion went on, it became increasingly apparent exactly what sort of stories Roland had a penchant for.

"Hey, let me guess. You like stories that star commoners—ones where the weak overthrow the strong."

"You're right. But a majority of the people who purchase entertainment books are nobles, so the commoners rarely ever win in the end."

Also among the nonfiction books that Roland read were a few that would never be allowed in Belgaria.

"Are you a liberalist, Roland...?"

"I won't deny it."

The philosophy wasn't outright banned in Belgaria, but it was one that might cost a person their seat in government if they proclaimed that they supported it.

"Really? Even though you're a noble?"

"You seem to misunderstand—the main objective is not for the commoners to overthrow the nobility."

"But you want to make the emperor the same as the commoners, right?"

"That's not it either. At its core, liberalism is the belief that everyone should have the right to pursue happiness."

"Eh? Well, I mean, of course they should."

"It seems obvious, right? But look at how things actually are. This is just one side of the philosophy, but it's the one I focus on most. From the moment a commoner is born, they are fated to be exploited for the rest of their life. This can never be overturned, no matter how much effort they put in—at least, not

under Belgaria's current system."

"Those who prove themselves in battle can always become a chevalier."

"Yes, but what about the people who instead wish to thrive through trade? Are farmers not allowed to be happy?"

"So... we shouldn't tax the people?"

"We're talking about giving them the freedom to choose how they live."

"You're certainly making some bold claims here."

"My points may appear somewhat heretical from the perspective of a noble. I'm also aware that I am somewhat of a hypocrite. The expensive meals, these clothes, this manor... They were all gained by exploiting the people."

Bastian scratched his head. If nobles made a living through exploitation, then his own livelihood was founded on exploitation on top of exploitation: the royal family gathered taxes not only from the people in their immediate territory but from the nobles as well.

"Once upon a time, when people feared the night, when they needed to band together to hunt, a king was necessary. Back then, it only made sense for the strong to get the lion's share of the food."

"Yeah, makes sense."

"But now, we can sleep peacefully. We do not need to hunt, for we can work the fields; the people have found ways to live without relying on physical might. In this day and age, for what reason must the emperor and nobles live in greater luxury than your common man? Because their ancestors hunted a great many deer in an era where that was important?"

"Hmm..."

Bastian was hiding his royal heritage, so he couldn't just come out and say, *"My ancestor founded the Belgarian Empire."* But Roland made a good point—why did that connection even matter?

Elize's words crossed his mind. *"So all the hard work was done in a past life, and the main character is simply reaping all the benefits? I do not have a very high impression of someone who can do that without feeling deeply ashamed."*

Is that also the case here? Bastian wondered.

"I guess it's not as if the royals or nobles put any effort in themselves," he mused aloud. "In most cases, the person in question is irrelevant; it wasn't them, but one of their ancestors who worked hard and succeeded. And yet, they are able to live in luxury simply because they were born into it."

"And the common folk are forced into harsh lives for the same reason."

"That's definitely kinda strange..."

"The country had already taken shape by the time we were born—by then, it was common sense for nobles to live in luxury, and for commoners to foot the bill. We quickly grew accustomed to it, but that was our mistake. Everyone should have an equal right to seek happiness."

"Mn... But without an emperor or nobles, will there even be a country? What about representatives and the military—those sorts of roles?"

"The people can select their own representatives. And the nobles aren't the ones who protect the people, but the soldiers. This is how a country should be managed in the modern era."

"The modern era..."

"If you're interested, give this book a read. It's in High Britannian, but that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"N-No, probably not."

Bastian was studying abroad, so he had picked up enough to comfortably get through his daily routine. Books about politics, however, were another story.

Seeing the look on Bastian's face, Roland suddenly started to chuckle to himself. "This is a piece of High Britannian fiction—a mystery novel," he explained. "The author's a trueborn liberalist, and he did a good job weaving those ideals into the story. I'm still studying it, so I lack the knowledge or the confidence to try and teach you myself. This book should do a better job than I can."

"I don't see myself ever becoming a liberalist..."

Bastian was royalty. It was true that he had fled his home country fearing a

power struggle, but he did not intend to abandon it, nor did he intend to overthrow the emperor. Based on what Roland had said, he definitely agreed that there was something wrong with how the Empire was currently structured, but the very thought of commoners taking command and choosing a representative seemed much too unrealistic.

Say a foreign diplomat visited—how could they expect to foster favorable relations when their representative didn't even know the proper etiquette? And if some random soldier were given the right to command, how could they ever win wars?

Bastian knew there were skilled commoners out there, but surely they could just distinguish themselves and rise to the rank of chevalier. If the farmers weren't being properly rewarded, they could simply reduce the amount they were taxed or institute a bonus for those who brought in excellent yields. As far as he was concerned, they didn't need to completely upend the Empire's customs; a simple reform would be enough to improve the people's lives.

"It sounds to me like those liberalists are burning their houses down just because they don't like the mess inside," Bastian mused.

"You're smarter than you look."

"Ahaha! You flatter me!"

Their conversation continued long into the night, coming to an end only when Elize arrived to drag Bastian away.

"You're injured, Bastian! Just how late were you intending to stay up?!"

✧ ✧ ✧

High Britannia was overwhelming Belgaria. They had already fought off the Second Army in their first land battle when they engaged in their first major counteroffensive on May 19th—the Battle of La Frenge. Here, their First Division had achieved an overwhelming victory over the Seventh Army despite being up against more than double their numbers.

There was no denying that High Britannia had managed to flaunt the superiority of their latest guns and cannons, and they had done so in an engagement already under the close observation of so many nations. This was a

major incident that would shake the very foundations of the continent.

Up to that point, the political landscape had been shaped almost entirely by the strength of the Empire's cavalry and foot soldiers. But if a small number of High Britannian soldiers—men who weren't even their elites—could devastate the imperial army, then the power balance between nations was open to being completely rewritten.

Most countries could see that the era of guns had begun.

Diplomats from all over stopped by the royal palace of Queenstower, as did foreign merchants and engineers vying to snatch these revolutionary innovations.

High Britannia's technological prowess had always been highly evaluated, but demand was now higher than ever: it wasn't rare for goods going for a pound one month to then be sold for two pounds the next. The wages of skilled engineers doubled and then tripled, with a few eventually deciding to take up these foreign offers.

Before the war, the backstreets had been flooded with the unemployed, but now they were abound with job advertisements. There was lively banter here and there as if someone had won the lottery, and despite the fact that the country was still embroiled in war, towns were celebrating as though they had already won.

"Three cheers for the queen!" the men cried. "Hip hip, hoorah! Hip hip, hoorah!"

Applause filled the streets as they raised their ale glasses high into the air. The war was looking up, and public order was recovering. It was still dangerous to admit to being a Belgarian in town, but they could at least go out and shop without having to fear for their safety.

Even so, Roland did not return to school. Bastian found this development rather strange, and so he decided to address it over dinner one day.

"Sounds like the town's safe to me. Is going into school still too much of a risk? You want to study, don't you?"

"I do, yes. And I wouldn't have come abroad had it been something I could do

alone. But do you really think Belgaria will accept defeat so easily? We need to consider what might happen when the bad news comes in."

"That's true."

The head of House Tiraso Laverde was often away on what he called "a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." He rarely ever returned to the mansion, so only Elize and Marl joined Bastian and Roland at the table.

Elize eyed the two boys curiously. "I've heard that High Britannia's guns are overwhelmingly powerful. Are you sure there's even going to be bad news?"

Roland looked conflicted. "I could always be overthinking it..."

"Nah, Belgaria ain't that soft," Bastian interjected. "How many hundreds of years do you think that country's been at war? They might not have powerful new weapons, but they have skilled soldiers. They're the ones who fight, not the guns."

"You make a good point, but many say we have now entered the era of the gun."

"Guns don't kill people; people kill people. That's war for you. Just look at any era, and you'll find someone bragging about their weapons. Those people aren't the ones who know how to win wars."

"Do *you* know how to win wars?"

"'Course I do. I'm a man of the Empire."

While they did not share the same mother, Bastian's brother Latrielle was the commander of the First Army. He held the right to lead all of the Empire's armed forces.

Bastian was already an adult, though he had never actually experienced war before. In contrast, his close friend Eddie of House Balzac had been on the battlefield just a month prior, though he had apparently returned to the capital since then. This was simply the sort of country that Belgaria was.

"They won't go down without a fight..."

It wasn't long before Bastian's prediction was proven right.

✧ ✧ ✧

June 6th, morning—

Elize entered Bastian's room. While she was wearing her usual dress befitting a High Britannian noblewoman, her hair was more casually bundled up. She had recently started helping Marl out around the house, saying that she couldn't stand to be one-sidedly looked after anymore, and with the way she looked now, one might have mistaken them for mother and daughter.

"Good morning, Bastian. How are you feeling today?"

"A lot better."

He rotated his arm a few times, trying to stretch his shoulder muscles. He was far from his usual strength, but he had mostly recovered from his injury.

"Were you reading again?"

"It's just something I borrowed from Roland. If you want to write a masterpiece, it's only natural that you read a few first."

"Perhaps. Oh, but books are expensive, so you must be careful with them," Elize said, reaching for the small stack beside the bed.

"Ah!" Bastian suddenly panicked. "W-Wait! I can tidy these away myself!"

"Ahaha... That's quite all right. You're injured, so it's the least I could— Mn?"

Elize was mindlessly flipping through the book at the top of the pile when her eyes narrowed into a squint. Her smile, usually as elegant as a blooming flower, grew increasingly muddled by the second. Her cheeks flushed, and her voice began to quaver.

"B-Bastian...?"

"D-Don't get the wrong idea. This is a story about hotblooded men on an adventure, so the inserts are just a little... extreme."

"What is this *nude image* supposed to be?!"

"That's, err... a scene showing him being intimate with a girl he saved..."

“That’s indecent!”

“It’s love! Love, I say!”

“That’s not love; it’s lust! I’m checking the other books too!”

“Wait, no! I stand against this censorship!”

Bastian hurriedly snatched the books from the bedside table and hid them behind his back, so Elize had to climb onto him to reach them. His back and chest wounds had already closed, so it would have been easy enough for him to push her off; in fact, for someone with Bastian’s strength, she could have been moved aside with barely a pinky.

But the more he thought about it, the less sure he became of where it was okay to touch her. Her chest and hips were obviously out of the question, and he couldn’t grab her by the shoulder in case he left a suspicious-looking mark. Her arms were so slender that he feared he might break them.

“Show them to me!” Elize demanded.

“Th-Think about what you’re doing here!”

“If you truly have nothing to hide, you shouldn’t have a problem showing me!”

“No, no, no! How about we calm down?!”

“Why are you looking at things like *that* when you refuse to do anything with me?!”

“E-Eh?!”

Suddenly realizing what she had said, Elize froze, still straddling Bastian on the bed. She was so close that he could hear her every breath. She clapped her hands over her mouth, having gone red up to her ears, and embarrassed tears added an enchanting glimmer to her bleary eyes.

Bastian’s heart beat so violently in his chest that even he was concerned.

“Y-You know, Eli—”

There was a sudden knock on the door and then a loud *click* as it swung open a beat later. Whoever it was, they had shown at least some semblance of

courtesy, but they had barged in so abruptly that it was somewhat of an empty gesture.

Bastian and Elize frantically turned.

It was Roland.

“Hello, my good man! About that book I lent—”

Realizing what he had just walked in on, Roland stopped in his tracks, staring at the two on the bed for what felt like an eternity.

“I, uh... allowed you to borrow it because I thought you might appreciate the heroine’s beauty...” he stammered. “But alas, I’d forgotten that you do not need to settle for mere illustrations. My deepest apologies.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Bastian cried. “It’s not what it looks like!”

“I’m sorry for intruding on you two lovebirds. However, don’t you think such matters are best kept for the nighttime?!”

“What matters?!”

A large *bang* echoed through the room as Roland smacked the wall behind him. “Oh, woe is me! The Lord above gifted the earth with beauty, and yet I am fated to never lay my hands upon it. Curse ye, God! I shake my fist at thee!”

“Oi, Roland?!”

Raising a cry that would have earned him half a day’s worth of admonishments from a priest, Roland ran down the corridor in dramatic tears. The encounter had made Elize an even brighter red than before, and she appeared to be on the verge of tears herself.

“This is your fault, Bastian!” she yelled.

“*My* fault?!”

But it wasn’t long before Roland returned, sprinting back into the room. This was not the same man who had comically sprinted away moments before, though; his expression was deadly serious, and he tightly grasped a newspaper in his hand.

“High Britannia lost!”

✧ ✧ ✧

The paper had a new front-page story—

It happened four days ago on June 2nd. The Queen's Navy, which we had once thought held an even greater advantage than our land army, was dealt a devastating blow.

Based on Belgarian reports, they faced off against the naval division of the Empire's Fourth Army. Our 74-gun steam-powered Princess-classes were all either capsized or captured, and Admiral Oxford—along with a few other captains and a majority of our naval infantry—have been taken as prisoners of war.

Our hold of Port Ciennbourg has been overturned. The loss of the port and our command of the sea has left the High Britannian Army stranded in Belgarian territory without supplies. We have also received reports of the newly crowned Queen Margaret accompanying the army to the front lines, and we are working as fast as we can to verify the validity of these statements.

Parliament will most likely move forward with peace negotiations, but in the million-to-one chance that Her Majesty has been taken prisoner, it may take several years for us to pay the ransom required for her return.

There are concerns that the war may draw out as well; there are many past precedents of the Empire fending off an invasion only to invade their former aggressors in retaliation. The Grand Duchy of Varden, who invaded Beilschmidt territory last year, lost Fort Volks to a counterattack just this February.

The commander of the Beilschmidt border regiment at the time was one Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—a mere fifteen-year-old girl, though one with the famed Black Knight Jerome in her service. This young princess has recently taken her position as commander of the Empire's Fourth Army, and there is a great likelihood that she was the one who took command during the naval battle.

Will our front lines crumble under this young Amazon of the Empire?

Let us look forward to a glorious resurgence of our great nation's valiant

officers...

The latter half of the article was chocked full of emotional appeals, no doubt intended to raise the readers' fighting spirits after such a string of disheartening news.

Bastian held his head. "Is this for real...? She seriously flipped the war upside-down..."

"Is that your little sister?"

"Yeah, something like— *Ahem*. Nope. Never heard of her. Nuh-uh."

"I see."

Elize had climbed off the bed and was now standing beside it. Bastian had gotten up as well.

Roland leaned his back against the wall, folding his arms with a serious look on his face. "I do so happen to know an individual with some influence in military matters, so I asked them—"

"Are you seriously the same age as us?" Bastian interrupted.

"How rude. I am clearly sixteen."

"Well, the way you talk is a bit..."

"U-Urk... Th-There is no shame in an intellectual speaking in such a manner. More pertinently, it seems the fourth princess has a skilled tactician by her side."

"Oh, really?"

Both High Britannia and Belgaria were fervently at work gathering information; each knew about the internal makeup of their enemy to a certain degree.

"He is Third-Grade Admin Officer Regis d'Aurick, apparently... Do you know him, by chance?"

"I only ever fought with the First Army."

"Understandable. I don't know how the rumors hold up to reality, but those in

the know... They call him ‘the Wizard.’”

“Hah?! ‘The Wizard’?!” Bastian did a spit take at the ridiculous name straight out of a fiction book.

“He conquered Fort Volks at a numerical disadvantage, and now he has bested the Queen’s Navy, who were thought to hold an insurmountable dominance at sea. It is understandable that they would refer to him as such.”

“Hm...”

“I personally hail from the south, so I don’t know him, but you were raised around the capital, were you not? Perhaps you’ve heard the name, at least?”

“Regis d’Aurick? I’ve never...”

All of a sudden, the realization struck him—two years ago, during the spring. That young soldier he had met at the library may or may not have been called Aurick, and perhaps his first name might have been Regis...

Bastian vehemently shook his head. “No, couldn’t have been. He was wearing a commoner’s uniform. And more importantly, a guy who gets scolded for reading pulp fiction instead of working couldn’t possibly be some amazing tactician.”

“Considering he was unknown up until recently, perhaps he’s fresh out of the academy. In any case, the town’s probably in an uproar.”

“Have you gone to check it out?”

“No, I only saw the news a moment ago. But it’s blatantly obvious if you give it some thought: just when they thought their guns and cannons gave them an overwhelming advantage, the High Britannian Army lost—not even to Latrielle, the rumored future emperor, but to his fifteen-year-old sister.”

“Well, I’m sure it put a damper on their victory celebrations.”

“If victory is uncertain, all that remains is their fear of Belgaria. It is only now that they have begun to realize they declared war on the strongest nation on the continent.”

“Bit late for that...”

Elize's expression darkened. She and Bastian had endeavored to stop this very war, and not only had they failed, but now her nation was headed toward defeat.

"It's not your fault, Elize..."

"I know, Bastian... I'm okay, really."

Roland shrugged. "We should be more worried about ourselves. Violence toward and even the murder of Belgarians has been on the rise as of late, and while these are officially considered crimes, there aren't enough officers on the street. Even when culprits are found, they're being released for lack of evidence, among other things."

"The hell's that all about?!"

"They call themselves the Royal Soldiers, but really they're just criminals—a gaggle of robbers and murderers. They're largely composed of youths who couldn't go to war. They claim to have a just cause, retaliating against the Belgarians who killed their fellow countrymen."

"It's not like the Belgarians living here had any part in that! Not to mention, High Britannia's the one who picked the fight!"

"The nation will struggle to control them when they're trying to rally everyone's fighting spirits. And for the criminals running amok... that reasoning hardly matters."

Not just Bastian, but Elize tilted her head as well. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's one of the ugly sides of humanity, I'm afraid... We find amusement in abusing and criticizing others."

"Th-That's not true."

"Of course, their conscience would prevent them from abusing those who don't deserve it—everyone wants to be the Good Samaritan, after all. But once some reason is spotted—no matter how minuscule it may be—the script is flipped entirely. When they are convinced their target is deserving of criticism, they can attack them as much as they wish, without any pangs of remorse. Such

is the case for those wielding violence against Belgarians right now. I'm sure they have their own excuses, but it ultimately boils down to their lives not having turned out how they wanted, so they recklessly alleviate their frustrations in the name of *justice*."

Elize was at a complete loss for words.

Bastian cast his eyes down. "Then they're just weak, ain't they?"

"Indeed. With neither the courage nor the backbone to face their own problems, they are left at a standstill, unable to scale the walls life has thrust before them. They look up to and envy success, all while looking down upon and sneering at those beneath them. Their time is spent searching for those they can lower the hammer of *righteousness* down upon, like starved stray dogs on the prowl. And while I hold them in contempt, I could not say it to their faces, for it would make me no better than them."

"Perhaps..."

"This news of our defeat will surely radicalize the Royal Soldiers even more. The gloom they endeavor to rid themselves of will only embolden their fears of these 'invading' Belgarians. There is no doubt in my mind that they will exhibit more misplaced patriotism than ever before."

"What can we do?"

"I'll need to discuss this with Marlborough, but... I am considering returning to Belgaria."

"What?"

"I cannot study here anymore; not only is my life in danger, but there is no point in me staying in a country where even the library is out of my reach. I have friends and comrades here, but I also have my own ambitions."

"Your own ambitions...?"

"Oh, right. You see, I... No, well... It can wait. For now, we must act. We are fortunate in that our house in Belgaria is located in the south of the Empire, and our limited contributions to the war mean that High Britannia's nobles and civilians are apathetic toward us."

“Do you have a ship?”

“We’re at war; passenger and private vessels are prohibited. But there is a ship I can use.”

“You’re stowing away, then?!”

“Not too loud, Bastian.”

Bastian clapped a hand over his mouth, then muffled out a quiet, “Sorry...” They were in a room in a corner of the manor, though, so it was unlikely anyone had overheard.

“In any case, I’m returning to my home,” Roland said. “How about it? Would you like to come with me, at least until the war dies down?”

“Us? Are you sure about that?”

“Leaving you here might bring trouble to Marlborough somewhere down the line.”

“G-Good point...”

“I want some time to think about it,” Elize muttered, looking rather conflicted.

Roland nodded. “It’s an easy choice for Bastian and me, but High Britannia is your motherland, so I understand why you would waver on this decision. Please keep in mind that there is a search warrant out for you, though, so I personally do not want to keep you at Marlborough’s manor. It will take some time to arrange for the ship, so you have a while to think it over.”

“...Very well.”

✧ ✧ ✧

As Roland predicted, the group calling themselves the Royal Soldiers grew even more extreme. As a sense of defeat swept over the town, public order deteriorated to the point that Belgarians weren’t the only targets of violence and abuse—other High Britannians who were arbitrarily selected as enemy sympathizers soon found themselves being sacrificed for the cause as well.

✧ ✧ ✧

One week later—

The ship was set to leave port that night, but Elize still could not bring herself to make a decision. Bastian had grown equally unsure; with a search warrant out for them both, he didn't intend to leave her behind, but neither did he want to drag her along against her will.

The sun had begun its descent when they were both summoned to Marl's private room. It easily could have been mistaken for the master's study, as there was an entire wall lined with rows upon rows of books like one would expect to see in a library.

In the center of the room was a large desk and a leather chair in which Marl was seated. She looked as though she had somewhat wasted away. Perhaps there was a lot weighing on her mind.

"Bastian, how is your body holding up?" she asked.

"It feels a bit dull, but the wounds don't hurt anymore. Thanks a bunch for all your help."

"That's good." She placed a small wooden box on the desk, then turned her eyes to Elize. "Have you made your resolve to cross over to the Empire?"

"I'm still hesitant... I had a goal in this country; many expectations were placed upon me, and many people have thrown down their lives to support me... I've failed... I've lost everything... But even so, I can't help searching for something—anything—I could do for High Britannia."

"So I take it you believe you won't be able to do anything once you've left for Belgaria."

"There's no doubt in my mind."

"Were you... against this war?"

"I still am. I believe a country prospers in peace. Why do you ask?"

"My apologies. I know that was rude of me, but I needed to know."

"I understand."

"I believe *this* is what you were looking for..." Marl said, pushing the wooden

box she had put on the desk over to Elize.

When Elize opened it, her breath caught in her throat. Contained within was a lone golden ring engraved with the royal seal, signifying her as the ruler of High Britannia. It took on the shape of a rose.

“Th-This... How did...?”

“The people I reached out to can be quite odd, but they’re reliable. They sift gold from Greybridge river, dredging the sediment for any valuables they can find. Not even the smallest grain of gold dust gets by them, so I was sure they could find a ring if put up to it.”

“That may be the case, but... surely they would have kept it for themselves...”

“The gold panners have a guild, and I purchased it through their chairman.”

Elize’s eyes wavered as Bastian patted her on the head. “Isn’t that great, Elize?” he said. “Oh, and, err... Thank you so much, Mrs. Marl!”

“Thank you!” Elize repeated, putting her hands together and dropping to her knees as though praying to God.

Marl rose from her chair and walked around the large desk until she was standing right before Elize, likewise lowering herself onto her knees. “Am I right to assume you are Elizabeth Victoria, the true queen of High Britannia? I should be begging your forgiveness for my countless discourtesies...”

“Not at all... While I received the ring from Queen Charlotte, I could never make it to the castle, and so I was never enthroned... Mrs. Marl, please forgive me. I owe you so much, and yet I did not tell you...”

“What are you saying? Your decision to remain silent was completely understandable, given your situation.”

Elize stood, taking Marl’s hands in hers. “You have my gratitude.”

“I was certain from the moment I saw that ring. You are more worthy than Queen Margaret, who started this senseless war.”

“I haven’t the words... but I’m already...”

“House Tiraso Laverde lacks any significant power, but we are on the board of

the Trade Federation.”

“Ah, I didn’t know that.”

“We publicly only deal in textiles, but importing iron ore to produce high-quality steel is an important enterprise of ours. Regardless of the war’s outcome, now that High Britannia has made an enemy of the Empire, this steel will be necessary.”

“Y-Yes.”

“I have my finances and the influence that has come from them. I’m sure they will prove of some use to you, Your Majesty.”

“...I am not a queen. Right now, I am simply Elize Archibald.”

“Understood. Then Elize... please, feeble as we may be, permit us to assist you in leading our country down the correct path.”

“I would be glad to. But what do you want me to do?”

Their conversation seemed to be progressing smoothly enough, but Bastian still thought it necessary to step in. “Depends on your goal,” he said. “I’m grateful for all you’ve done, Mrs. Marl, but if you’re going to start a civil war, I’d rather take Elize and run.”

“...I don’t want to be used for war either,” Elize murmured anxiously.

“We merchants seek peace,” Marl smiled. “We desire an end to all wars, whether big or small. And to that end, Elize, I want you to flee to Belgaria.”

“Eh?!”

“I appreciate that this might come as a surprise, but there are already great tremors passing through High Britannia. If a new candidate for the throne appears in addition to them, opposing the new queen, it will most likely lead to civil war.”

“That would be rather troublesome...”

“A development like this while we are at war with Belgaria will cause this country to fall into ruin. Right now, the best action you can take is staying out of the public eye.”

“I understand...”

“I know you may have suspicions about leaving everything to me, but... could you trust me on this one?”

Elize nodded; it seemed that she had already come to her decision. “I am but a powerless student right now,” she began. “If your proposal is to the benefit of this nation, as I believe it is, then I’ll go to any lengths necessary to achieve it. I can understand why you wouldn’t want me—or rather, the Rose Ring—to come out at a time like this.”

At those words, a touch of relief seeped into Marl’s smile.

“Are you really all right with going to the Empire, Elize?” Bastian asked, wanting to be sure.

“It certainly was not an easy decision to make. This is the land of my parents, my friends...”

“Well, this is you we’re talking about here... I’m sure you’ve put enough thought into it.”

“To be honest... I’m still not completely confident.”

“Really?”

Elize bit her lip, her eyes wandering across the room. “I’m *always* anxious that my personal feelings might be... clouding my judgment.”

“Hmm?” Bastian wore a quizzical expression, evidently having failed to decipher her vaguely worded explanation.

Elize merely sighed.

Their conversation having come to a close, Bastian and Elize thanked Marl for all her help, their host responding that she would gladly receive them if they ever met again. They also gave their thanks to Shia, the maid who had looked after them. She seemed especially melancholy as she said, “Please drop by again, when we’re at peace.”

The sun had set by the time Bastian and Elize departed the manor. The moon shone brightly, and the stars twinkled in the night sky. To ensure they couldn’t be traced back to and subsequently cause trouble for House Tiraso Laverde,

they departed for the port in a standard cab rather than a marked carriage.

✧ ✧ ✧

The moon floated in the night sky, its contours blurred by a faint veil of clouds.

“I can’t stand it...” Roland murmured.

“What’s wrong?” Bastian asked.

“I can’t stand when things aren’t spelled out clearly.”

“Are you... talking about the moon?”

“Indeed. But it has a strange charm to it, don’t you think?”

“I’m getting a bad feeling myself... The ship’s leaving from here, right?”

“That’s right. It’s too late to turn back now.”

It was a quiet night at the harbor. The wind was weak, and the waves softly lapped the docks. The scent of salt hung faintly in the air, as one would expect from a coastal hamlet.

This was a wharf used primarily for imports and exports, with a number of warehouses lining the shore beside the docks. With only the moonlight to illuminate their surroundings, one careless step might send them plummeting into the sea below. And of course, there were no handrails.

“I don’t see any ships...” Bastian murmured.

“It can’t drop anchor here or else it would stand out too much. It should arrive at two,” Roland explained. “It was a trial and a half trying to find a captain skilled enough to dock in such little light.”

Bastian and Elize followed behind Roland as he threw open the doors to one of the warehouses. All eyes were suddenly on them. There was a large gathering inside of around a hundred people, all carrying heavy parcels and stifling their breaths in the darkness.

“Eep!” Elize let out a faint shriek, taken aback by the ominous sight.

“Fret not, my good people. It is I,” Roland announced, raising a hand. A wave of relief spread across the hundred or so gathered.

“Hey, who are they...?” Bastian asked quietly.

“Others who want safe passage to Belgaria. We’ll load the one hundred and seven people here, as well as the goods in the warehouse one over, then leave before daybreak. The ship should be here soon...”

“You didn’t bring much with you.”

“I kept my luggage to a minimum. Just some food, and this here,” Roland said, gesturing toward the single book in his hand. There wasn’t anything on the cover.

“What’s that book?”

“You’re not going to laugh, are you?” Roland asked. He looked unusually bashful.

“Well, depends how funny it is.”

Elize gave him a light slap on the arm. “Don’t be rude, Bastian.”

“Well, I would like to get your opinion on it eventually...” Roland conceded. “This is a book I wrote.”

“You serious?!” Bastian exclaimed. “You were writing an adventure novel too?!”

“It’s just a collection of my thoughts, so nothing quite so pleasant. One would normally write it down on manuscript paper, then take it to a printer. If you’re lucky, bookmaking specialists might even buy the manuscript off of you.”

“But you wrote it by hand.”

“When I saw that you were writing a story, I decided that maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to put my musings in order like this.”

“That’s so cool, don’t you think?! Much better than a plain bundle of paper!”

“...I can’t deny that,” Roland said, shying away a little.

Bastian had a broad grin on his face. Even Elize seemed to be caught up in their excitement, a smile playing on her lips.

But their high spirits didn’t last very long. Bastian was the first to notice it—a boisterous group of carriages were approaching. “What now?!” he exclaimed,

bolting back to the doorway.

Roland came up beside him. “What’s wrong?”

“Carriages. Three—no, four.”

“What?! Is it the police?! The army?!”

“Too noisy for that... These aren’t unified forces. They’re almost like a bunch of... kids.”

“It really can’t get any worse than this...” Roland gulped, his voice quavering. “Bastian... It’s the Royal Soldiers.”

An uproar spread through the warehouse. The Royal Soldiers were a group who wouldn’t hesitate to kill anyone they identified as Belgarian, and many of those gathered here were fleeing the country for precisely that reason. While a few of the one hundred and seven had guns and swords, the vast majority were unarmed civilians; it was questionable whether they would be able to mount a decent enough resistance.

Bastian checked to make sure his dagger was still at his chest. It was a weapon he had borrowed from the Belgarian treasury.

“So they’re here. I should have seen this coming...” Roland muttered to himself.

“They’re coming straight toward us,” Bastian warned. “Someone must have leaked our plans.”

“Khh...”

“Well, with over a hundred people involved, the information was bound to get out somewhere.”

“It seems I’m not fit to be a tactician after all... My scheme was full of holes.”

“Oi, what are you going to do?”

“There isn’t much I *can* do. I’m the one who set up this stowaway plan, so it’s only natural that I take responsibility for it. I’m going to buy you as much time as I can. Everyone else, flee through the back door.”

Roland rushed out of the warehouse. Bastian told Elize to stay behind, then

quickly gave chase.

✧ ✧ ✧

Thirty men in total stepped out of the carriages that had come to a stop in front of the warehouse, the hunger in their eyes making them look like starved wolves. They carried swords and guns, and the stench of alcohol was thick in the air. The men were not wearing armor, simply donning thin blue overcoats atop their normal streetwear. It was presumably their uniform.

Standing at the front of the group was a short bald man who looked to be around twenty. He seemed to be the most important one among them.

“Well, well, well! What d’you think you’re doin’, gathering out ’ere in the dead of the night like this?” he sneered.

Roland moved to block the doors. “You are the Royal Soldiers, correct? We are returning to Belgaria, leaving before we can cause High Britannia any trouble. Is that not in your best interests?”

“Hah! You insane, mate? We’re at war ’ere. Killin’ the enemy’s the name of the game!”

“Hold on. Everyone here is a civilian. They haven’t violated any of High Britannia’s laws.”

“So what? Belgarians kill civilians like it’s nothin’!”

“Kuh... That... That may be so... In that case, I will abide by whatever you say, as a representative. Please, do not lay a hand on the others.”

“Gwa ha ha! Now that’s somethin’ I can get on board with. Hear that, boys? This guy wants to be our slave! Hya ha ha ha!”

The men all burst into laughter, some even starting to jeer Roland.

“Naaah! Don’t need ’im!”

“Come back when you’ve got a pair of honkers on you!”

“How ’bout you take a swim, four-eyes!”

The bald man at the lead drew his sword. “So you’ll do whatever I say, yeah? Well, I want to carve you up real good. You can be our first for the night.”

“...Do you have no conscience?” Roland asked.

“My friends all went to war and died to your buddies. That’s more than enough reason to take revenge.”

“That’s pure sophistry! It does not justify you breaking the law. You’re just using your friends as an excuse to sate your own sadistic desires! Don’t you think you’re doing them a disservice?!”

A sound argument only served to rile them up further. Roland spoke sense, and that was precisely what enraged them. The bald man in particular was already seeing red; he brandished his sword in a frenzy.

“Enjoy the sight of your own innards, ’Garian!”

Roland grit his teeth as the blade came down on him.

“Urgh—!”

“Hey now, you charged out on your own, so I thought you were gonna take them on. Either dodge, parry, or beat them down before they can reach you. It would’ve been pretty painful if that connected.”

His hand reaching over Roland’s shoulder from behind, Bastian had pinched the tip of the man’s sword, stopping it mid-swing.

The bald man’s eyes widened in shock. Naturally, he had never had this happen before.

“Th-The hell...? Who’re you?”

“My name’s not cheap enough for the likes of you.”

“Gah! Wh-Why? My sword... won’t move?!”

Push or pull as he might, the blade wouldn’t budge so much as an inch.

“You’ve never honed your sword skills or trained your body, but you’ve certainly had enough beer. And that’s barely even skimming the surface. Someone like you isn’t going to stand a chance beating me with brute force.”

“Grr...!”

“You’re killing Belgarians because your friends were killed, right? Then you can’t resent what I’m doing here, can you? ’Cos here you are, trying to murder

my friends!”

Bastian pushed the sword back, easily knocking the bald man off balance. It took only a step to close the distance between them, then he hammered a kick into the man’s knee. A *twang* like a snapped rubber band resounded through the harbor, immediately followed by piercing screams.

“D-Did you kill him...?” Roland asked, clearly flustered.

“C’mon, did nobody teach you? People don’t die from a crushed kneecap. He won’t be walking anytime soon, though.”

The man’s leg had been bent in the opposite direction; he would likely never wield a sword again.

“Bastian... You’re... You’re going to die...” Roland choked, his lip trembling. “I told you to run... Why did you come save me...?”

“You’re smart, but you made two mistakes. First, his pals took the long way around. They’re waiting at the back door.”

“What?!”

“They’re complete amateurs, so it wasn’t hard to sense them. I’ve already told Elize, so that door’s staying shut tight. As for your second mistake—I’ll never be killed by nobodies like these!”

The others flew into a rage at the fall of their leader, screaming like wild beasts.

Bastian drew his dagger, the *Vite Espace Trois*. The blade, which had been tucked into a splendidly ornamented sheath, drew a slender triangle from its wide base to its tip. It was double-edged, thin, and light as paper, with rumors saying it could be swung fast enough to sever sound itself. At around 4 palms (30 cm) long, it was said to have been made to the same dimensions as one of the feet of *L’Empereur Flamme*, Belgaria’s founding emperor.

“It’s surprisingly annoying trying not to kill anyone!”



Bastian swiped horizontally at the first man to charge him, severing his cheap sword with a shrill scraping noise. As his opponent faltered, doubting his own eyes, Bastian landed a hard kick to his knee.

Before the man could even cry out in pain, the prince had already disarmed another in the literal sense.

Farther back was a man poised with a firearm. It was too dark for Bastian to make out his finger movements, leaving him no choice but to lurch more to the side than he normally would have to avoid the bullet's potential path as he approached.

The man screamed as he squeezed the trigger, his poor stance and shaky aim making it even harder for Bastian to predict where the shot would go. It thankfully tore through the air some distance away, but that didn't stop the thug from crying out, "He dodged a bullet?!"

No, you're just a bad shot! Bastian wanted to reply, but it quickly occurred to him that this misconception worked quite nicely in his favor. He swung and severed the tendons in the man's two wrists; had his opponent not been holding a gun, he only would have targeted his dominant hand.

Roland was trembling. "Y-Your movements aren't human..."

"Quit being ridiculous! It's all down to training!"

Bastian had trained as much as he could at the mansion, but suddenly going all out made his body feel heavy. By his estimate, he was only about half as agile as he would have been in perfect condition, but even that was enough to toy with drunkard amateurs. This was practically a warm-up compared to when he had plowed through the soldiers at Fort Greybridge.

Still, he was admittedly winded by the time he had dealt with the last man.

✧ ✧ ✧

Bastian wiped the sweat from his brow. "Phew... My skills really have started to dull..."

The defeated Royal Soldiers littered the ground, letting out pained groans as they writhed in agony. The entire spectacle had made Roland turn ghostly pale.

“Are you really human?!” he exclaimed.

“Sorry for surprising you, but uh... this much ain’t too rare among my siblings and acquaintances.”

“You’re saying there are even *more* people who can do things like that in the Empire?!”

“Not too many. Latrielle and Eddie, to name a few. In fact, anyone they call a hero probably could have done that with ease.”

“I’m starting to understand what you meant when you said war is about the people involved...”

“Well, I didn’t mean having one person take on numerous opponents. Plus, these guys aren’t even soldiers to begin with... That’s why I didn’t kill them.”

“So it seems.”

“A few are bleeding quite a bit, sure, but as long as their friends around the back aren’t too heartless, they should get treated before they kick the bucket.”

“I should hope so. I wouldn’t want anyone to die, no matter who they are.”

As the two started heading back to the others, Elize scampered out from the warehouse. “Bastian! Are you okay?!”

“Of course I am.”

“The ship is here!”

“Good timing.”

A reserved number of torches ran along the dock, serving as a guide for the mid-sized sailing ship that could just barely be seen through the darkness. Anyone who could manage to dock in these conditions without crashing was sure to be considerably skilled.

The people cowering within the warehouse hurried out. Most scrambled to be the first on board, but some stopped to thank Bastian, gratefully lowering their heads.

Elize exhaled a relieved breath. “Thank the heavens. I was worried about what might happen...”

“Can’t believe even you were concerned. You should know by now that there’s no way I’d lose to a bunch of amateurs.”

“Well, I’m certainly glad my fears were unfounded.”

“Ha ha ha...”

All of a sudden, Roland screamed something. Bastian couldn’t quite make out what it was, but he only had to turn around to realize his own failure.

The bald man with the broken knee was pointing his comrade’s gun at none other than Elize. He knew that Bastian would have most likely been able to avoid the shot, which was precisely why he had directed the muzzle at the girl.

Bastian stepped forward to protect Elize, crying out, “Stop!” as the man pulled the trigger.

“Die!”

The gun discharged.

“...!”

As Bastian braced himself, Roland leaped out to shield him. His body twitched at the impact of the bullet before crumpling to the ground, where he lay motionless like a stringless puppet.

Bastian threw his knife at full force, and within moments it was embedded in the bald man’s torso. Was the wound lethal? He neither knew nor cared. Not right now. He ran over to Roland and took him in his arms.

“Roland!”

“Bastian...”

He had taken the bullet to the chest. The fact that he wasn’t already dead meant it couldn’t have reached his heart, but the bleeding was too severe. It must have torn through an organ or a thick blood vessel.

“G-Get a grip! I’ll get you a doctor!”

“It’s fine... I’m... beyond saving... right? I can tell...”

“Ngh...”

Bastian knew from his battle experience that this was a fatal wound. His eyes grew hot, and tears started to blur his vision. “I-It’s because I... let my guard down...” he stammered.

“You’re wrong... This was my... strategic failure... Thank you... for protecting my comrades...”

“But this all would’ve been for nothing if you die here!”

“I was unlucky... That’s all there is to it...”

“Is there really nothing we can do...?”

“Bastian... I entrust this to you.”

Roland tried to move his hands, but he could barely muster the strength. Elize squatted down beside him, tears streaming in rivulets down her face. It was up to her to retrieve what he so desperately groped around for—his book.

“Is this it?” she asked.

“Is this it, Roland?!” Bastian demanded.

“Yeah... That’s right... I leave it... to you... A world where every person... has the right to be happy...”

Bastian tightly gripped his friend’s now feeble hand. “I promise! You can leave everything to me!”

Roland’s eyes crinkled into a weak smile. “Aah... It was fun... while it lasted...”

Such were the final words of Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde.

✧ ✧ ✧

The sailing ship left during the night. Deep inside its hold, Bastian wiped the blood from his dagger, then opened the book Roland had given him. These were the only two things he was bringing with him.

Elize was there by his side. If she hadn’t urged him away, Bastian wondered whether he would have remained there, frozen, holding the husk of what had once been Roland. He knew that wasn’t what his dear friend, who had thrown down his life to protect him, would have wanted.

He needed to get a grip. He knew he couldn’t worry Elize any further, but he

had shed so many tears that it felt as though he had gone completely numb. He was struggling to even process his own thoughts.

Could he really keep his promise like this...?

Bastian flipped to the next handwritten page. His words.

His eyes heated up again.

“Elize...”

“Bastian... Please, no more crying...”

“He’s here. Right in here. This is where Roland lies. His words are with me...”

A quiet sob escaped him. Elize reached out her hands and placed them around his head. In her warm grasp, he shed another tear.

The ship sailed the dark seas toward Belgaria.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess: Loose Threads*! This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This book was released alongside the seventh volume of the main story. I've been given more pages than usual for this afterword, so I'll try using it to describe each story.

The Eve

When I kicked off the main series, I originally published this online as a short story to introduce people to the main plot. It takes place before Regis and Altina met. That said, my prose back then was quite old and rather stilted, and I rewrote so much that it's essentially a different story from what it once was.

"The Eve" essentially goes into why Regis was assigned to the Beilschmidt border regiment back in the first volume, as well as why Altina was pretending to be a carriage driver.

Auguste, the Silver Princess

This story was also originally published online. I wanted to delve a little deeper into the secrets of First Prince Auguste, who initially appeared in the third volume. That was where the main cast really started to expand.

The fourth volume became the story of Third Prince Bastian, but that one was also initially intended to be no more than a short story. Auguste's short story was received quite favorably, so Bastian and Elize's became an entry into the main series.

One of my goals when writing this series was to depict a single history from multiple viewpoints, and I am quite satisfied with the results.

A Vow to the Morning Star

This was a new piece written for this book. Readers took quite well to Bastian and Elize from the fourth volume, and there were a surprising number of people who said they wanted a continuation of their story, so it has taken shape here.

This is a turning point in Bastian's life, the ripples of which will eventually spread through the history of the Empire.

I'd quite like to write another short story volume if the opportunity ever arises. If you want to read more stories like this, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Now on to a status report (or maybe just some advertisements?):

I don't like writing about things unrelated to the work at hand, but with so many more pages to fill in this afterword...

Koma Hibiki, a manga I worked on that was published in *Dragon Age*, has released its second volume. It's about high school girls playing shogi.

This winter, I'm also scheduled to release a KanColle light novel with Kadokawa Sneaker. I'm working on it in earnest.

On September 29th, *Alice and Shirley of the Floating Academy* will release Volumes 3 and 4 simultaneously. It's about tea and sweets, and a school for those with special abilities.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. Your illustrations are always amazing. I'm sure I've caused you quite a bit of trouble, putting out two books at the same time... Thank you!

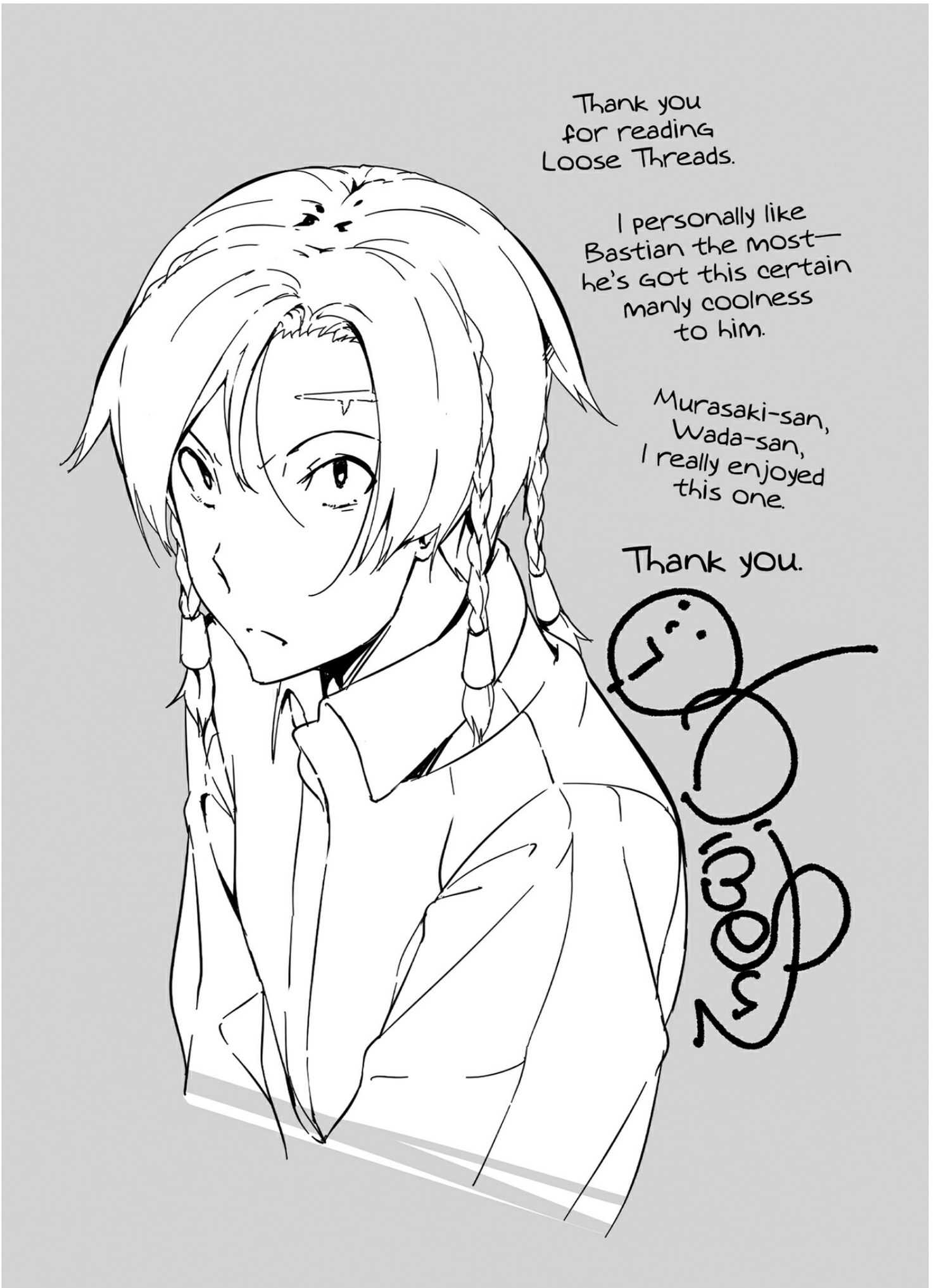
To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. Even here, you've put out yet another wonderful design.

To my editor, Wada-sama. Two books at once is pretty tough, eh? Now that this is over, though, let's go eat something nice!

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 for reading Loose Threads.
I personally like Bastian the most— he's got this certain manly coolness to him.
Murasaki-san, Wada-san, I really enjoyed this one.
Thank you.


Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis
Whimsical Maid
Clarisse
Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina
“Do I know of any books that might help at a time like this...?”
He closed his eyes and examined the humble library in his head, wildly flipping through page after page of all the books he’d ever read.
“Hm, I see... Yeah, I don’t have a clue.”
Clarisse sighed, though she did not voice any opinions herself.

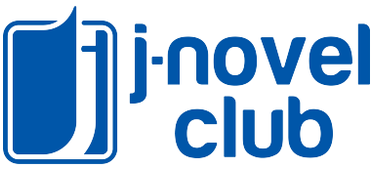

Head of House Balzac
Eddie
“I take it you’re Le Dragon du Fer.”
Replacement Prince
Felicia
Felicia cradled the wounded Lillim, placing her on the bed. The maid continued taking short, pained breaths.
Head Maid
Lillim


Third Prince of Belgaria
Bastian
Heir to High Britannia
Elize
Son of House Tiraso Laverde
Roland
“These two are wanted criminals!”
“Th-This!”
“If you’re talking about the war declaration, we already know.”
Bastian shrugged.

ALTINA

the Sword Princess





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 9 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Altina the Sword Princess: Loose Threads by Yukiya Murasaki

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Kieran Redgewell

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Yukiya Murasaki 2014

Illustrations by himesuz

HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA SHOKITAN

First published in Japan in 2014 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: May 2021

Premium E-Book